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THE ETERNAL RETURN OF MYTH (Vol. III)
The Fascination with Myths
in Contemporary (Audio)visual Productions

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The Fascination with Myths in Contemporary (Audio)visual Productions

Guest Editors: Laura Pereira Domínguez and Metka Zupancic

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Presentation of the Contributions

LAURA PEREIRA DOMÍNGUEZ

This third volume on the Eternal Return of Myth addresses the persistence of myths in contemporary visual and audiovisual cultures. The visual becomes a key element in the reflection included in the articles that comprise this volume, not only in the context of myth, but also in our culture in a broad sense. Certainly, the visual transforms mythical paradigms as well as establishes new ways of transmitting information and affecting the readers/spectators, and therefore it is pertinent to ask how new artistic and cultural contexts influence myth and its capacity to provide explanations of our current world. This issue contains nine contributions from different areas of study and considers four artistic disciplines in which the visual emerges in a particular manner: cinema, comic books and graphic novels, photography and videogames. The rich dialogue among the different topics provides a variety of tools to approach the endurance of myth in contemporary (audio)visual culture as well as it allows the readers to grasp mythical phenomena as a multifaceted occurrence.

Despite the diversity of scholarly backgrounds and research interests, we can identify common trends among the contributions. As current times invite us, the rise of female characters inspires compelling studies on the mythical structures and references that contributed to their creation and, thus, the first articles coincide in finding in female characters—both protagonists and those that are being observed—a suggestive object of study. On the other hand, heroes are also a common interest in many of the contributions, whose diverse approaches raise relevant questions from a myth criticism point of view.

In their article “Myths of femininity in American Gods,” Luis Alberto Pérez Amezcua and Ethel Junco examine the potentiality of myths in a hypermodern product, i.e. the TV series *American Gods* (2017-present). The return of the myth in this context is explained in the light of the uprooting of a migrant society, which also crystallizes in the coincidence in space and time of different mythical traditions. In this article, Pérez Amezcua and Junco explain how myth is incorporated in the TV show as a central element that influences the characters and the plot, instead of a mere reference that can bring a mythical echo to the viewer. In this sense, they explore two groups of mythical figures: Ostara, from the Germanic tradition, and the Zoryas, from the Slavic tradition. The myths inserted in the show by Neil Gaiman and Bryan Fuller are associated with current identity issues, such as those formed after the crisis of rampant capitalism in recent times, or the long-standing concern with feminine identity, which is addressed from a cosmological tradition.

Another contemporary heroine who has gained in popularity on the big screen in the last years is Katniss, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* film series (2012-2015). In her contribution, “Virginité, wilderness and bows: Diana’s return in contemporary cinema,”

Laura Pereira looks at the creation of the hero and its exploitation by the market and advertising industry. Her contribution also explores the resonances between the symbolism of a mythical figure and the elements that identify a popular person as an object of economic exploitation. Particularly, Pereira analyses spectacular actions performed by the protagonist, unveiling her ethos, while these outstanding actions are potentially repeated in order to affect intradiegetic and extradiegetic spectators. Contemporary culture has changed our consideration of women and their references in history. Heroines from the past are now retrieved by current fiction, but also classical categories, such as the hero, can be appropriated and reshaped in favor of female identity. In her article, "*Game of Thrones*: Ser Brienne of Tarth and a Feminine Reinterpretation of Classical Heroes," Rosa María Stoops goes through the most classical definition of the hero, pinpointing the attributes and moments in the narrative where Ser Brienne reveals herself as a true classical hero, in opposition to other characters in the trilogy and in the show. As the author points out, even though the characteristics of the hero were not associated with either men or women in the first place, male heroes' narratives ended up absorbing them; however, nowadays, heroine accounts such as Ser Brienne's reclaim these elements, as a reflection of women's social advancement.

The growing importance of feminine characters in contemporary audiovisual culture correlates with the number of scholarly works devoted to this topic, even though it is not a completely new interest. Literature has served as a departing point for many of these characters, which continue their journey in film adaptations. The mere change of medium means a shift of our approach to the character and to myth. Following Gilles Deleuze's understanding of cinema, Indrani Mukherjee approaches the Maliche myth as nomad subject, in Rosi Braidotti's terms. In her article, "'Seeing' the Malinche Myth as Nomad Subject in Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate*," post-human seeing entails a political act that changes the viewers, also making them nomadic as they circulate the moving images that constitute cinema. In addition to suggesting a new engagement with filmic representation, the text analyses the Mexican figure of the Malinche as myth, departing from María Lugones's decolonial feminism.

The gaze is the motif that guides the work of Juan González-Etxeberria, appropriately associated with the myth of Orpheus. In his article, "The Forbidden Gaze: Orphic Visuality and Loss in Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*," he explores the intertextual linkages between Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* (1994), the ancient myth, and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), creating a relationship between ancient Greece and post-modern Canada. More importantly, González-Etxeberria reveals the crucial role of form in the work of both filmmakers. He identifies two main elements shared by Hitchcock and Egoyan: the relation between sexuality and death in their films, and the exploration of the gaze, an essential component of the myth of Orpheus. According to González, Egoyan's film stands out for his intention to connect with the irrational side through images, which are displayed in a particular form conceived to achieve catharsis and access the psychological component attached to the myth.

Beyond film, the influence of the visual can be noted in other artforms, such as comics and graphic novels, as María Porras's contribution shows. In her article, "Monstrous Heroes, Epic Monsters: A Contemporary Graphic Adaptation of Beowulf," she elaborates a comprehensive reflection on the figure of the hero in the graphic novel *Beowulf* (2013, 2018), by Santiago García and David Rubín. Porras guides the reader through the course of translations and cultural adaptations of the legendary story of *Beowulf*, which actually

started the Spanish graphic novel. Then, she addresses innovations that the comics artform add to the literary Beowulf: firstly, comics facilitate the contact between the medieval hero and the postmodern shape of the legend, that is, the superhero, an entity very much linked to mythology, according to authors such as Umberto Eco or creators such as Stan Lee. Porras argues that the viscosity given by the comics enables other significant encounters that might change the very meaning of the legendary character, such as the graphic encounter between the hero and the monster, which facilitates an ambiguous reading that questions the ideas of margin/center or self/others.

Moving on to a different art, Pablo Medina offers a suggestive explanation of the shift in the narrative of the *God of War* videogame saga, firstly constructed as a series of situations that seek action, and then focused on the story of Kratos and his evolution as a character. In his article, "Kratos, mythical father," Medina examines the changes that take place throughout the saga, from the inclusion of Greek mythology as a backdrop for Kratos' action to the integration of Norse mythology in the character's evolution and his relationship with his son.

Taking a turn on the visual, Katarzyna Jerzak's article focuses on photography. In her contribution, "Mutilated Images in Contemporary Martial Society: Between Mythology and Memory," images are treated in relation to their role in our culture, and in other cultures that preceded ours. Jerzak deals with harsh images, images that sometimes are difficult to contemplate. Mythological references, she argues, became a part of the quotidian and of the modern culture, while they still connect us to the time of the heroes. The article explores a collection of photographs that were taken at major moments, when "images [were] imperative," as Jerzak suggests.

Finally, forming the coda to this issue, Xiana Sotelo provides her critical review of *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation*, a book closely bound with this volume, both for its object of study and for the coincidence of some contributors. In her article-review "Testing the Resilience of the Myth in the Audiovisual," Sotelo analyses in depth all the chapters of the book, edited by José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb. Sotelo sharply identifies and evaluates the most relevant topics in the volume, which encompass diverse myth-critical interests and different artforms.

The present volume addresses a broad range of topics, but inevitably it also poses several questions. These contributions note different narratives and images where myth emerges and establishes diverse relationships with contemporary spectators. Images are an essential part of our everyday life to the extent that we do not always notice them, but the visual, as these articles show, alters myth even when it continues to represent old narratives.

Films, the Visual, and their Effects on our Minds and Emotions

METKA ZUPANCIC

1. The Orientation of our Research

The visual, and in particular the audiovisual, appears to be overbearingly present in today's world, not only in the so-called "technologically advanced" society, but also in places where we could hardly imagine the existence of the devices that allow us to constantly check information that is often accompanied by images. Abundant media research is already warning about various levels of influences this exposure to the devices may have on today's humans, especially the younger generations (see, f. ex., Kabali *et al*i 2015). What does such a massive exposure to images mean for the research in the field of myth criticism, the approach we apply in the present volume of *JCLA*? The main hypothesis is that images, together with all other domains of human creativity, from literature to fine arts and even music, carry within them a layer, a substratum that I would call a "mythical charge." In this sense, the main purpose of our collective endeavors in this context is to verify the modalities in which the underlying mythical schemes, connected to ancient myths from various cultures, continue to manifest themselves in the vast realm of the (audio)visual. Furthermore, we are interested in finding out how these mythical models are being transformed because of the various media in which they may appear, from photography, paintings, comics and video games to cinema.

My thoughts, as developed below, rather than attempting to answer some of the most persistent questions mentioned above, are meant to invite further discussions that will eventually bring more clarity to the underlying (mythical) structures that we continue to perceive even in the material that would initially seem far from any transcendental concerns. Some of the main issues I wish to deal with in this introductory essay relate, in the first place, to what I identify as the inevitable presence of a narrative, of a story, in the (audio)visual material. The story that underlies the visual domain thus appears to be the very condition for a possible presence of myths in a given cultural product—and, hence, for their identification.

As I will show, referring to some of the leading specialists in the field, our culture continues to be text-based, which means that the images remain attached to a narrative and do not exist on their own, outside of a story. This deeply engrained perception of images has a huge impact on the way we study the mythical elements in the realm of the (audio)visual: as we know, the word "myth" comes from the Greek "mythos"—a story, a narrative. The other major point I address below relates to our conscious or unintentional integration of images, and especially our ability to also register their mythical or more largely symbolic elements, particularly in films or in any other productions that include moving images.

As myth criticism scholars affiliated with the research groups primarily located at the Complutense University in Madrid, Spain, we have witnessed the expansion and continuous explorations of multiple cultural manifestations of the imaginary. The notion of the imaginary, a vast domain that includes various intellectual, psychological and spiritual dimensions, is thus a general term that incorporates all the expressions of myths, symbols and archetypes. As our research has shown, myths or any other manifestations of the imaginary might be more or less visible, more or less readily available for observation, be it in literature, fine arts or in music. Furthermore, the imaginary has established its strong presence within the contemporary modes of artistic expression supported by the new technologies, such as the visual and the audiovisual. It also includes more interactive—and even addictive—phenomena such as video games, as a specific venue for all types of mythological or archetypal reenactments. The discussions that were launched some ten years ago, thanks to the teams created around José Manuel Losada and concentrated at the Complutense University, have generated new research projects, instigated in order to continue even further the (collective) explorations of the many dimensions of the imaginary.

These creative endeavors partly culminated in the October 2018 series of extensive conferences at various universities in Madrid. They were centered around the questions of how the audiovisual “industry” inevitably continues to build upon the imaginary, regardless of its other preoccupations, often of a more technical nature. The conferences explored countless mythical dimensions from a variety of points of view, perceptions and understanding of traditions and their reactivations in modern media. In many ways, the present editorial project thus represents an extension and a prolongation of the Madrid 2018 debates, adding to them some new developments in an on-going discussion that is far from being exhausted, as new “mythical phenomena” and modalities emerge and prosper.

Additionally, this third issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (JCLA), in a series dedicated to myths and their manifestations in contemporary culture, builds upon the achievements of our predecessors. In many ways, we thus continue where the previous two issues left off in their study of the “eternal return”—observing the perennity of myths not only throughout history but in today’s world. Quoting from the second volume codirected by Manuel Botero Camacho and Juan González Echeverría:

Myths still talk to us. This second volume on the Eternal Return emphasizes the relevance of myths in our world. As a matter of fact, its main objective is to show how these emotional and structural narratives have been adapted to modern times in different artistic disciplines, such as literature, cinema or graphic novels. (Botero Camacho & González Echeverría 2019, 1)

Far from disappearing, myths result into new forms of reinterpreting the different dimensions of human reality, as well as their interpenetration. The reason for this is to be sought in the way myths—as rebellious narratives—can still produce further possibilities to understand contemporary themes and concerns, and keep their main quality of making us getting to know ourselves. (5)

In the first volume of the JCLA journal, *A Special Issue in The Eternal Return of Myth: Myth Updating in Contemporary Literature* (2017), the co-editors Ana González-Rivas Fernández and Antonella Lipscomb defined their collective endeavors as follows:

The eternal return still both fascinates and baffles scholars from all over the world, who witness how the myth acquires multiple forms as new narrative modes appear. As a

response to this phenomenon, all the articles collected in this volume try to analyze the various implications of the eternal return in modern times, covering the perspective of different nationalities as well as the expression it takes in different disciplines. (2017, 2)

As our project continues with the international and intercultural perspective described above, we also take example in the rich scholarly interactions generated in the second *JCLA* volume. Actually, our colleagues already set the path for the approaches and the investigations of the contributors in our own volume, proving indeed the perennity of myths in their multiple manifestations:

As all the articles in this volume seem to suggest, the eternal return is both our blessing and our misfortune, our strength and our weakness. Human fate is shaped by the eternal return, and, whether we want it or not, it seems our true happiness relies on the full acceptance of this fact. Since the dawn of humankind, myths from all over the world have re-enacted the different forms of this eternal return, as illustrated in nature, heroes or marvelous lands; the same applies to writers, painters, and artists in general, fascinated all of them by the cyclical pattern that surrounds us. The present volume offers examples drawn from American, English, French, Italian, Greek, and Russian literature, as well as from cinema, music, comic-books, and politics. Poets, novelists, playwrights, composers and filmmakers have given a new twist to myths that emerge once and again, always renewed and adapted to modern times. Neither can new technology nor new media resist the alluring and evocative nature of ancient myths. (2017, 6)

Indeed, in the present volume of the *JCLA*, we examine how the new approaches to revitalizing and reorganizing myths practically span across continents, especially in the new fields or the newer media that we gather under the notion of “(Audio)visual” — to include at times the more “visual” and allow it to prevail over uniquely “audiovisual” in the submitted essays. Also worth underscoring, with the largest number of contributors coming from various Spanish universities, the present volume of *JCLA* continues to partake in the discussions within the research groups and subgroups on myths in Madrid and elsewhere in the country.

2. Myth and the (audio)visual

As we dive in the realm of myths and the above-mentioned (audio)visual, both domains need to be defined in the first place: the notion of *myth* and the whole vast domain of the *visual*, in its various manifestations. The present text does not have the pretention of covering exhaustively any of the two notions. Rather, its primary aim is to remind us that we shouldn't forget some of the basic dimensions of the two, to be better aware of how they combine, and to understand what makes their combinations possible.

To mark the continuity of our interactions within the realm of cultural myth criticism such as explored by the Complutense University research groups, together with the development of ideas about the study of myths, especially in the media that have been largely enhanced through the digital age, let me use the general definition of myth such as suggested by José Manuel Losada in the 2016 volume *Mitos de hoy*,¹ reproduced in English in *Myth and Emotions* (2017, xiii), and more recently in *Myth and Audiovisual Creation*:

Explanatory, symbolic and dynamic account of one or various personal and extraordinary events with transcendent referent, that lacks in principle of historical testimony; is made up of a series of invariant elements reducible to themes submitted

to crisis; that presents a conflictive, emotive and functional character, and always refers to an absolute cosmogony or eschatology, either particular or universal. (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 20)

If we correlate Losada's succinct definition with the essays included in the present volume, it is important to remember that the presence of myths in a particular setting presupposes and even requires some *extraordinary events*, often of *transcendent* nature, that bind together the narrative and the actions of the protagonists, and that a particular myth is recognizable thanks to the *invariants* that constitute it. The modifications that occur in the new forms of myths are often a source of renewal, ingenuity and even originality. They are to be compared to the invariants from various mythical stories, which still need to be recognizable and properly identified for a myth to be functional in a particular context.

Speaking of the visual, or rather the audiovisual such as we know it in cinematography, we should remember some of the historic facts that led from the exclusively visual forms to the moving images combined in a new art form. The profound change from the ageless visual forms may have been stimulated and also made possible by the advancement of photography in the 19th century. Maybe we could also associate this change in artistic aspirations with the spreading endeavors by the impressionists, at the turn of the century, to capture, in a sequence of paintings, the light and the colors of a specific moment in a day, and then eventually display them side by side, as a continuum that could generate an illusion of a movement.

At the core of the development of cinematography, stemming from the 1895 presumed initial combination of images into movement,² two schools have evolved side by side. Actually, although the first one might have become predominant, none of the two prevailed, while they sometimes combined into new ramifications, especially in more recent years. The brothers Lumière were documentarists at heart and thus set the trend for the movies as documents—meant to capture some of the key events of their own time, as it were. The other approach, established by Méliès, was based on the rather unbridled imagination (see Sever—OM Produkcija 2015, 27-28). The brothers Lumière's approach was vastly attractive to Charlie Chaplin, for example, and to the new industry in the United States. The latter determined the cinematic conventions in which the events in front of the camera are considered far more important than the image itself, namely the phenomena that can be developed thanks to the particular nature of the cinematic medium (Sever—OM Produkcija 28).³ The approach created by Méliès saw its continuation with Buster Keaton and even the brothers Marx, with the attempt to capture the very essence and the mystery of the medium, creating the effects of illusion, of something beyond reality, and thus influencing the many avantgarde schools of cinema (Sever—OM produkcija 28).

Possibly alluding to similar issues, and speaking generally of images, I find that José Manuel Losada's explanation of the visual similarly inscribes itself in a distinction between the two major orientations that we still witness today:

We reduce the immense variety of images to a typology: the more traditional—the image that represents an expected reality—and the more innovative, the image represented by a series of unforeseen associations with no real previous referent. Both images coexist in our imaginary world, and both can replicate (for example in a drawing, a painting, a sculpture) in the real world. We call it visual

creation when, in the latter case, an image is coupled with an artistic dimension.
 ("Myth and the Digital Age," in *Myth and Audiovisual Creation* 2019, 17)

It appears that both approaches to the visual, the more realistic attempts to "reproduce reality," combined with the attempt to take the images to a different, higher artistic level, are certainly at the core of filmmaking. They will affect the way in which particular mythical elements with their invariants, or conjoined in a more complex mythical story, will appear in a visual artefact or an audiovisual production. But let us see how some cinematographers view their creative medium, first from a more professionally oriented point of view that attempts to define it in its "true" nature. Then, I wish to look at the association of images with the narrative: if images are to carry mythical schemes that evolve in a particular cinematic setting, we should remember that in all situations, the *narrative* is the *sine qua non* condition and the very foundation for the presence of myths.

3. Godard and Greenaway on the Fate of the Audiovisual

Jean-Luc Godard and Peter Greenaway, two major contemporary film makers, both rather revolutionary in their attitudes and in their productions, claim somewhat paradoxically that the hundred and twenty odd years of cinematography have not yet taught us one major skill. We—the audiences and possibly the cinematographers—do not know how to watch films and how to properly use the images, to give the medium its full value. Separately, yet expressing similar positions, Godard and Greenaway claim that this incapacity to learn a new or a more "appropriate" way of seeing is an anticipation of cinema's most probable decline (Godard, for example in his 2016 interview with Daphné Roulier; Greenaway, for example in his 2014 lecture "The Cinema is Dead, Long Live the Cinema"). In addition, Jean-Luc Godard is convinced that the whole Nouvelle Vague–New Wave school of cinematography that he helped to establish, together with his own cinematic endeavors, must be understood as a continuation of the Lumière documentary model, especially as the group started off with the short films that they produced in the nineteen-fifties. In this sense, to make a film, in Godard's mind, documentation comes first, and fiction is then affixed to it (see "Jean-Luc Godard et Anne-Marie Miéville—Prénom Carmen" 1984 interview with Christian Dufaye).

Peter Greenaway, regardless of his noted cinematographic explorations, insists that he remains a painter at heart. In his insightful talks, with many ideas that carry over from previous lectures, he contends that ours continues to be a civilization of the word and not of the image, regardless of the overwhelming presence of various types of visual materials around us ("The Cinema is Dead, Long Live the Cinema," Turku, Finland, 2014; "Cinema is Dead," Mexico City, 2016). He is quite convinced that we should never even have developed moving pictures, but rather should have stayed with paintings and only added music to them. In his opinion and in his artistic experience, nevertheless, the old adage "In the beginning, there was Word" is to be deconstructed, as one cannot have a text without first having an image: to posit that he believes in the primordial value of images might thus be an understatement. Yet, as he claims, the problem comes from the fact that in general, a film is nothing more but an illustrated text, and is thus completely predictable. This means that we have a text-based cinema, an extension of a text-based society. The biggest pieces of our times, such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc., are in fact only illustrated texts. As we notice, Greenaway, without speaking of mythology *per se*, chooses to mention two cinematic productions that are completely

grounded in myths, and in this sense, his conviction about the text-based cinema is crucial for our own approach, as I will show it later. If in addition, the audiences are visually illiterate, as he is convinced, it would most probably help us all tremendously to be visually trained, to see how images work on the screen and to better understand the mythical dimensions of a particular (audiovisual) work of art.

When speaking of the “death of cinematography,” Greenaway regularly cites Godard: in his opinion, the biggest problem in movie theaters is a whole room of spectators fixing for some two hours, in silence and in darkness, a square on the wall in front of them, with three-thirds of the world concealed behind them. In this sense, cinema hasn’t evolved at all; and, for this same reason, in his mind, it is doomed. Yet, the director admits that ironically, the anticipated decline is accompanied by an almost unrestrained proliferation of new cinematographic productions. Additionally, for both Godard and Greenaway, the new technical opportunities to consume visual materials are in fact detrimental to the art as such. People now watch them alone at home, on various devices. One could even posit that we became movie consumers as we have previously done it with books—dealing with the text individually, in our private space, before the advent of the “moving pictures.” Yet, the early cinema was definitely a public event and practically a ritual; I will return to it later.

In a certain way, for Greenaway in particular, the main problem with the (audio)visual, regardless of the device we use, is the frame, the most artificial proposition ever developed. As he claims, we don’t see the world or each other in frames, even from the anatomical point of view. Maybe the destruction of the frame as the basis of a film might lead to a new visual culture. For his own part, Greenaway wishes to revive the audiovisual by introducing a non-narrative, multiscreen cinema based in the present, which would allow him to use and develop the elements that are uniquely visual, such as, for example, translucency and opacity. The question is whether a non-narrative production is ever possible, especially from a semiotic point of view, as a signifier might always produce significance. Yet, where there is meaning, there is myth: in myth criticism, we have been trained to watch images in order to uncover the hidden myths, archetypes or symbols underneath the visual. In other words, we are interested in images inasmuch as they convey meaning, the “text” underneath it.

In view of the income-oriented mass production that continues to pile more “stories” upon the visual, we may often deplore the loss of “true heroes” on screen. An informal discussion group about myth criticism, mainly around the nucleus at the Complutense University in Madrid, have recently discussed the notion of “disenchantment” especially in the realm of the audiovisual. We might rather consider the watering-down of possible heroic characters and their feats mainly as a sign that we have now entered the realm of stereotypes.⁴ I see it especially in the science-fiction or the post-apocalyptic productions, because from the point of view of industry, this is what the so-called general audiences would supposedly be capable of accepting, digesting, and eventually identifying with. As an example of a possible modern (mythical) hero that is progressively turned into a stereotype, while the actor himself might become a heroic figure for his audiences, allow me to cite the 2019 film *Joker* by Todd Phillips, starring Joaquin Phoenix, doubtless a very powerful performer, justly honored with a plethora of awards. As we observe it with “celebrities,” successful actors tend to be elevated to a heroic, exemplary status, regardless of the stories they incarnate in cinematic productions. The disturbing factors in *Joker*, as I see them, concern the underlying values

that the film seems to be promoting, maybe with the intent to show the tragic fate of the mentally unbalanced man at the center of the narrative. Whatever the aspirations of the lead protagonist, he embodies a progressive desacralization of a possible mythical character and a spiraling movement toward complete degradation. When the mad mobs start to wear clown masks in a stereotypical emulation of their degraded, psychotic and even criminal model, the “original” clown, he, Arthur Fleck, becomes a true representation of the ill-perceived and wrongly integrated “ideology” that only leads to chaos and trouble.

4. The (Audio)visual and the Collective

Yet, if there is to be a myth, as stated by José Manuel Losada (June 2014), it needs “extraordinary events” as its building blocks. Such events may generate a feeling of transcendence, of grandeur that audiences seem to crave, possibly as a way to feel elevated in their own psyche. The cathartic function of myths might be derived from the shared experiences of mythical realms, especially during a collective viewing of a film, which thus becomes a particular type of a ritual (I return to these notions further in the essay). Paradoxically, the required “extraordinary” dimensions seem to be created more frequently in science-fiction, with the beyond-the-normal, the paranormal and the exceptional characteristics of the protagonists and the situations in which they are featured. It is certainly impossible to provide an appropriate answer to the question of why people seek extraordinary feats in the movies, but, as already alluded above, I could suggest that we cannot ignore the ingrained urge to find a deeper meaning to our existence. Consciously or unconsciously, the industry consequently capitalizes very efficiently on the perceived deep yearning of the audiences. This yearning has obviously been proven and verified often enough, for this type of films to keep flooding the market. As in a vicious circle, continuous and repeated demands then make it worthwhile for the films to be produced. In the name of entertainment, willfully obliterating any deeper impact of these productions, the industry continues to manipulate the audiences. It creates, as I suggested above, either mythical or rather stereotypical models for the current and forthcoming generations, often in connection with extreme and unnecessary, gratuitous violence that fills large portions of these productions.

Let me approach the topics tackled above from yet another perspective. In 2019, when our project was launched, we celebrated the anniversaries of some outstanding cinematic creations, some of which have generated true cult following. These celebrations certainly gave us an additional justification to continue our inquiry into the role the movies play in today’s world, especially in view of advanced technologies that convey images to us with accelerated immediacy and presence. From the point of view of myth criticism, those images carry with them not only superficial possibilities of meanings, but very often a whole symbolic and thus archetypal charge. The impact of the symbolic dimensions will most probably fail to be immediately integrated in viewers’ minds and in the complexity of their emotions.

In every second of a film, a succession of 24 single images creates the illusion of an uninterrupted movement, yet, our eyes are only able to distinguish and integrate three or four of them (Sever—Om Produkcija 2015 [1994]: 27). This fleeting succession of images may indeed account for the “entertaining” —quick and often superficial— aspects of the cinematic industry. A deeper perception of all the multiple layers contained in a film would require more thorough and repeated encounters with the same material.

When dealing with a book, be it a traditionally written word-by-word narrative or a graphic novel, readers may stop at any time and easily return to a previous formulation that will help them understand the next sequences. In films, as in music, linear continuity in time calls for undivided attention. It requires that we let go of immediate pondering, reflections or any other reactions. They would only make us lose the thread, the establishment of the “story” through all the tools that are brought together for us to be taken in.

In this sense, a film (as well as a musical event) functions indeed in a manner similar to all possible rituals and has to some extent replaced the cathartic processes of ancient drama. If this is the case—if we agree that this is how films affect us, we may also accept that through this particular ritual, our psyche or a more hidden layer of our beings will be able to perceive the symbols, the archetypes underlying the narrative, and be affected by them. The need for a darkened room, with our full attention fixated forward, is conditioned by the very nature of the projection of the images that come from behind. A passive screen at the front, which only serves as a receiver and does not interact in any way with the audience, adds to the mysterious nature of the collective event. This particular ritual then subconsciously binds together all those present.

As in all rituals, most probably, the impact may be amplified when a larger community partakes in an event. This is probably what Francis Ford Coppola had in mind in the summer of 2019, in Bologna, Italy, when he introduced the “final cut” of his own “cult” movie, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), celebrating the 40 years since its creation. Another “cult” film comes from an even earlier time: Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*), premiered in 1959, continues to attract audiences over decades. The question, in the case of these two films, and certainly many others that marked us, is to understand the nature of the *engouement*, infatuation, craze, which happens much less in the shared spaces, but rather at an intimate level of our perceptions. Even if we watch a film in a crowd, the story that is being told will affect each and every one of us differently, intimately. Keeping in mind that only three or four images, out of the 24 contained in a second of a movie, are being assimilated by our brains, each of us will eventually resonate with a different segment of the projected frames and will recompose them differently in his or her mind.⁵ As it happens, the story, and the different levels of its integration in our body-mind-psyche constitution, may bind together the spectators in a movie theater. It nevertheless fails to create a true collective infatuation similar to the one created during the concerts by Beatles, Queens, Rolling Stones or many other similar groups. The communion between the musicians and the ecstatic crowds might happen because of a certain energy or vibrational level created by music, a topic I can only mention in passing. Another unresolved question is the way in which a “cult” following is created in cinema. Watching a sequence over and over again, in our own intimacy, after the eventual exposure to the group energy in a movie theater, will doubtless produce a lasting imprint on the viewers. But until recent years, a private repeated viewing, on a variety of devices, was technically impossible. A shared enthusiasm regarding a certain cinematic phenomenon must thus have been created differently, eventually through discussions or, to some degree, through repeated collective viewings.

5. Conclusion

Yet, massive obsession with films exists, persists and continues to occur. Another science-fiction series of films, building upon the success of the first 1977 installment,

created a major cult following. The initial *Star Wars*, celebrating more than forty years in existence, has recently been followed by the sequel nº IX, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019). In his 1988 televised interviews with Bill Moyers, titled *The Power of Myths*, Joseph Campbell provided an analysis of *Star Wars* in conjunction with his understanding of mythical heroes. He associated all the characters in the movie with the subsequently vastly exploited notion of monomyth; of the archetype that is subject to all the stages of a heroic journey. If he were to see the more recent *Star Wars* sequels, what archetypal strength would he have been able to identify in the newer productions? Had they lost any of the initial energy they carried, what would that mean for their proliferation? How meaningful are now the characters whose cinematic actions still try to emulate myths and archetypes but often linger in the realm of stereotypes? Are they being adapted to what the marketing strategies anticipate as the “needs of the crowds,” recommending special “recipes” that will potentially draw the largest possible audiences? Do archetypes eventually follow such trends and are being modified according to them? These are some of the questions asked by the contributors to this particular *JCLA* volume. Doubtless, these are also the questions that will continue to nourish the debates during the forthcoming myth criticism conferences, the first anticipated being on myths and science fiction.

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Notes

- ¹ The original text in Spanish reads as follows: “Escuetamente, defino mito como relato, explicativo, simbólico y dinámico, de uno o varios acontecimientos extraordinarios personales con referente trascendente, que carece en principio de testimonio histórico, se compone de una serie de elementos invariantes reducibles a temas y sometidos a crisis, que presenta un carácter conflictivo, emotivo, funcional, ritual, y remite siempre a una cosmogonía o a una escatología absolutas, particulares o universales” (Introduction, by José Manuel Losada, to *Mitos de hoy* 2016, 10).
- ² It should be noted that the 1895 birthday of cinematography may not represent its true beginning, yet, it is generally agreed upon, most probably because Auguste and Louis Lumière held at that time “the first public screening of their films” (Dixon & Foster 2008, xii). I’d like to underscore the notion of “public”—the fact that showing films was indeed an event destined to larger audiences, and thus, meant to bring about the awareness about the revolutionary new technique.
- ³ Circumstances having brought me back to Slovenia, where I can now further my exploration of the audiovisual, especially of cinematography, I was privy to abundant information and archival material from OM Produkcija/Production Museum and its Guardian. I’d like to take the opportunity to express my debt of gratitude to the authors of this collective entity, for the inspiration and verification of ideas.
- ⁴ With her 1991 volume *Les idées reçues: Sémiologie du stéréotype*, Ruth Amossy offers an unsurpassed analysis of stereotypes in general. In terms of the presence of stereotypes in

the films, see in particular *Film and Stereotype: A challenge for Cinema and Theory*, by Jörg Schweinitz (2011).

⁵ In terms of how our brains may respond to the visual stimulations that we call “moving pictures,” I am referring in particular to a significant passage from the vast 2008 volume, *A Short History of Film*, by Dixon and Foster:

Motion pictures don't really move. The illusion of movement on the cinema screen is the result of “persistence of vision,” in which the human eye sees twenty-four images per second, each projected for 1/60th of a second, and merges those images together into fluid motion. [...] Roget believed that persistence of vision was caused by the retina's ability to “remember” an image for a fraction of a second after it has been removed from the screen; later research demonstrated, however, that it was the brain's inability to separate the rapidly changing individual images from each other that caused the phenomenon. Simply put, persistence of vision works because the brain is receiving too much information too rapidly to process accurately, and instead melds these discrete images into the illusion of motion. (2008, 1)

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Myths of Femininity in *American Gods*

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Abstract

This article explores the way in which the TV show *American Gods* represents the myths of femininity and how they fit in the digital format, together with the implications of such a dynamic. It is proposed that the TV show recreates the feminine myth in a more successful way—in comparison with the homonymous book on which it is based—thanks to the advantage provided by the discussion about women in the hypermodern era through an equally hypermodern product, the television series. Thus, we find that feminine myths are typologically a contemporary reformulation of the ancient cyclic and lunar myths and that this representation is a statement of the importance of the participation of women in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Myth criticism, female agency, *American Gods*, Gaiman, hypermodernity, cyclic myths.

1. The Relevance of *American Gods*: Scope and Argument

Neil Gaiman is a British author that started his career as a writer of comics and then became one of the most respected authors of fantasy novels. Gaiman's novels are stories about stories and they explore the way in which those stories can exist in the mind of a person and take a life of their own. Although Gaiman's novels are set in the contemporary world, he weaves ancient myths and legends into them. Hence, we have stories within stories offering new interpretations in new plots. *American Gods*, published in 2001, is one of those fantasy novels. Gaiman sets the story in contemporary United States. The author puts his protagonist, Shadow Moon, into the realm of stories that live and breathe: the realm of the gods. These gods do not simply exist in people's minds. They are personified, physical characters and readers know about their divinity through their own words, since they confess to Shadow that they are gods. (This will also happen in the TV show.) We also know they are gods based on their cultural background. For example, whoever is familiar with Norse mythology will soon know that the owner of the crows Huginn and Muninn is the god Odin.

American Gods won the Locus, Bram Stoker, Nebula, World Fantasy, SFX Magazine and Hugo awards, which are the most prestigious science fiction and fantasy awards in the world. In April 2017, the American premium cable and satellite television network Starz aired the first season of an adaptation of the novel with Bryan Fuller (*Hannibal*, *Pushing Daisies*) and Michael Green (*Everwood*, *Heroes*) as showrunners and Gaiman himself as an executive producer. There are many reasons to study *American Gods* from a comparative perspective since the story has been adapted to different media. The story

is a transmedia phenomenon because besides the book and the series there are other creations (comic books, by example) based on this particular literary work. Nevertheless, we will focus on the TV show because we believe this format is currently the most important for the dissemination of myths. Michael Green and Bryan Fuller's *American Gods* adaptation was very well received by both audience and critics (Rotten Tomatoes) and is very attractive audiovisually.

The study of this show is also important from the perspective of cultural myth criticism because there are characters from different mythologies that interact. *American Gods* is a cultural product that, thanks to its enormous success, has taken its interpretation of myths to various parts of the world, thus offering a perspective that must be analyzed from the point of view of myth criticism. Both the series and the novel approach one of the most compelling challenges of our time: the loss of identity and collective memory caused by the migration of an immense number of people, who, for different reasons, are forced to leave their places of origin and, with this, their gods. Both the novel and the series show various people under the threat of forgetting the faith and traditions of various populations in the hypercapitalist world system. In our particular case, we review the way in which migration created a new and influential nation, the United States of America. Myth criticism, as proposed by Losada (2015, 11-14), distinguishes three factors that must be considered to make an appropriate analysis of the myths in their current cultural manifestations: globalization, immanence and consumption. It is curious that the series is the result and at the same time a critique of these characteristic factors of our time. The show *American Gods*, by its characteristics, is an ideal object of study to review these processes. We consider these elements here in relation to the characters.

The present essay will focus on analyzing the way in which the story presents female myths and how they are adapted to the digital audiovisual format, including the implications of such a dynamic. We propose that the series recreates the female myth in a more successful way than the book, due to the adaptive advantage offered by the discussion agenda around the woman who is verified on the hypermodern stage in which we live through an equally hypermodern media (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2007). The feminine myths in the series coincide in being typologically a reformulation of ancestral cyclic and lunar myths (as the latter are explained by Durand, 1996).

American Gods is a story that operates on two diegetic levels, which makes it more interesting, because it reveals at the same time—for Shadow, its protagonist, on the one hand, and for the viewer or reader, on the other—the existence of an alternative world, a world inhabited by gods. The story depicts the conflict over the confrontation between the “old” gods, who refuse to disappear because they have been forgotten or supplanted, and the “new” gods, who want to “reprogram” reality and control it by eliminating all competition. Significantly, the new gods’ names are Media, Technical Boy and Mr. World, allegorical representations of media, technology and globalization, respectively. Among the ancient gods Odin, from Norse mythology, Vulcan, from Latin mythology, and Anubis, from Egyptian mythology appear. The country is also inhabited by divinities or legendary beings from other latitudes: Africans like Anansi, Irish like Mad Sweeney, Arabs like The Jinn or Slavs like Czernobog. Thus, the show represents a fundamental part of migrant demography through a very peculiar pantheon. These gods, it must be stressed, only survive thanks to the fervor of human beings and can die if they have been forgotten or simply if they are weaker than others, hence the individual drama of each deity.¹

The first season aired from April to June 2017 on the premium channel Starz. The show consists of eight one-hour episodes now available worldwide on Amazon Prime

Video (without considering the non-legal methods to see it online). The second season premiered in March 2019 and a third season was recently confirmed (Hibberd), so it is going to be present for at least one more year, although his main creator, Neil Gaiman, is also thinking of a fourth season (Pena, 2019). This means a minimum of a five-year period of influence and distribution of myth and its “lessons” (Durand, 1996, 347).

The eight episodes of the first season can be considered a *road series* (a kind of generic evolution of the typically American *road movie*) set in symbolic or emblematic spaces of the United States. Shadow Moon (Ricky Whittle) has been released from prison after serving a three-year sentence for an attempted robbery and meets Mr. Wednesday (Odin, played by Ian McShane), who offers him a job. His wife, Laura Moon (Emily Browning), has died along with Robbie, his best friend, so he accepts the job, because he shares no ties with her hometown, Eagle Point.² With this, Shadow begins his initiatory path, as he will go through some phases of the hero’s path (Campbell), among which the initial test stands out: Shadow Moon fights the leprechaun Mad Sweeney and drinks mead, honey wine, “Drink of heroes, drink of the gods” (“The Bone Orchard”). Wednesday, or Grimnir, as they will call him,³ will recruit the old gods who are on his side to undertake a struggle to regain the strength that the new deities have taken from them. Although this is a story in which male characters predominate, the role of women is essential if we insert it in a reading horizon that problematizes modalities of gender visibility and agency nowadays.

2. Creative Encounters and Myth Adaptation

When Neil Gaiman wrote *American Gods* almost twenty years ago, he probably did not imagine that his book would be brought to the screen by one of the most acclaimed showrunners in history, Bryan Fuller. He did not imagine either that some of his characters, in the adaptation, would undergo some transformations that would increase their significance in the plot and, above all, their “*prégnance symbolique*” (as defined by Durand, 1996, 241), for example, the character of Laura Moon, that in the TV show is a protagonist. These modifications in the plot due to the creative imagination of the two artists and the participation of their enormous production team—as hypermodern production requires (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 36-39)—are also orientated to denounce the risks of consumerism and globalization in Western culture. Hertz Wendel de Camargo, following Muniz Sodré, reminds us that cinema and television are Narcissus machines, programmed to educate using sound and images in movement to represent reality and to function as training for living in society.⁴ The Brazilian researcher, in addition to highlighting this form of provision for social behavior roles, explores the relationships between consumption and the imaginary, also highlighting the importance of symbolic exchange that allows the circulation of images in serial narratives. These models, then, in the products at hand, show how the feminine role and other social challenges for equitable democratic coexistence are reproduced in the media.

Among Gaiman’s most famous works are *The Sandman*, which began in 1989 for the prestigious DC Comics, in which he already used a mixture of mythologies; *Coraline* (2002), a children’s novella that was adapted for a video game; *Stardust*, illustrated by the artist Charles Vess, specialized in the representation of myths, and adapted to the big screen in 2007. It is also necessary to say that Gaiman received, in addition to the already mentioned recognitions, a nomination for the Mythopoetic Awards for *American Gods* (2001).⁵

Bryan Fuller, meanwhile, is an American writer and television producer whose works include *Dead Like Me*, for the Showtime network, which explores life after death and has

a film adaptation to video; *Wonderfalls*, broadcasted on Fox, which had only thirteen episodes; *Pushing Daisies*, famous for its distinctive visual style and extravagant characters, developed around the faculty of its protagonist to revive the dead. Finally, there is *Hannibal*, based on the famous books by Thomas Harris, a psychological horror thriller that had three seasons and was critically acclaimed and praised for his visual style, and which became Fuller's most awarded series so far. It is remarkable that Fuller has abandoned many of these projects due to creative differences, but definitely, in *American Gods*, he applies what he learned from his past projects.

The work of the two artists is characterized by intermediality, their preference for the transitions with adaptations from a format to a different one. In *American Gods*, both the mastery of the fantastic-mythological genre of Gaiman and the symbolic-visual genius of Fuller are combined to produce one of the most interesting representations of the myths of femininity of contemporary series. This is the result—very important for myth criticism studies, in their search of various myths—of the coincidence, of the meeting of two true *mythmakers* and not only of people interested in sales. We follow the definition of mythopoetic literature offered by The Mythopoetic Society (2018), as one that:

[...] creates a new and transformative mythology or incorporates and transforms existing mythological material. Transformation is the key—mere static reference to mythological elements, invented or pre-existing, is not enough. The mythological elements must be of sufficient importance in the work to influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters, and must reflect and support the author's underlying themes. This type of work, at its best, should also inspire the reader to examine the importance of mythology in his or her own spiritual, moral, and creative development.

This definition, we believe, can be somehow applied also to the mythopoetic creators we are examining here.

In the present work, we analyze how a couple of stories of femininity are presented and how some of the series adaptations increase the mythical potential of the characters and themes of the book in their moral aspect, demonstrating that myth adapts well, in certain cases like this, to the conditions of commercialization of the industry and transcends its production premise to be channeled into works of art such as *American Gods*. We are only going to focus on the representations of the Zoryas (or Auroras) of the Slavic mythology, and of Ostara, of the Germanic mythology, although in another context, the same perspective might be applied to Bilquis (a representation of the Queen of Sheeba), Media (a new goddess) or Laura Moon (who refuses to die and is a kind of zombie). Furthermore, the implications of reconfiguration will be considered, since female characters bring up myths that function as an allegory of the cyclical, a return to the sacred that brings hope in this hypermodern era. They are nevertheless not freed completely from patriarchal determination, since, as Quezada Camberos and Leandro Jiménez affirm, every “coercive event intuitively an empowerment of ‘being a woman’ in our day, that is, taking into account that a woman should not grant the dominator that status, and should be protected” (212, our translation). The authors then list the obstacles on the way to such a situation: “The logic of domination is a principle imposed by tradition, by culture, by the historical accommodation of social roles according to the sexes” (215, our translation). Those roles could help, when properly represented in smart cultural products, to lead to gender equity in the near future.

Each of the goddesses, the Zoryas and Ostara, represent a different kind of incarnation in the United States. Each symbolizes the state of crisis of the contemporary hypercapitalist system that, as stated, has forced millions of human beings to forget their gods and lose their identity. We should remember that the “mythic narratives are the sacred stories that are central to cultural identity because, for the cultures to which they belong, these religious myths convey some significant truth about the relationship between human beings and the source of being” (Leeming, “Introduction”). These mythical narratives of femininity carry out the important role of characterization of female identity, a central theme in *American Gods* that we explore here.

3. Myth in Hypermodernity: From Cinema to Serial Narratives

Nowadays, myth moves around the world thanks to digital transmission, which takes it from one place to another almost immediately. Technological globalization, in this sense, allows the stories of different regions of the planet to coincide, to coexist and intersect. Myth syncretizes. A viewer, a gamer or a cybernaut receive myth in geographical areas that it did not expect to reach. Now, in addition, it comes accompanied by audiovisual resources that make it competitive in the global story market. Probably there is currently no more influential media for the transmission of the myth than the series, which circulate not only on cable but also through open television, piracy or on demand systems. The myth has adapted to the new media, although it has to compete with stories about itself that in some cases distort it (Losada & Lipscomb, 2015).⁶

Although cinema has lost its hegemonic position in the statistics about audiovisual consumption, the serial narratives that have relieved it have taken from it the foundations of the imaginary economy that allows the increase of consumers to a massive level. Since cinema is no longer the predominant medium of other times, and if cinema was the means by which myth was communicated most of the 20th century, then the series have been, so far, the great *mythophors* of our time, and *American Gods* is an example of this phenomenon. The commercial logic of the moment, moreover, does not hesitate to recycle the great heroes and their mythology (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 133). In this way, we witness the change that occurred in the dissemination of myth from cinema to tv shows. This change offers the same technological possibilities and, in addition, advantages for the expression of symbolic sets that support the conformation of its metaphoric meaning.

The current tv shows—like cinema—review problems and issues that were previously omitted or treated in a stereotyped way (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 15). An aesthetic of the singular in *American Gods* is also present in the myths of the feminine that find a place in the series, because, in some way, all the characters are marginal.

We are aware that no social commotion of our time has been as deep, as fast and as important for our cultural future as female emancipation. Therefore, the study of myth should not overlook this revolution. If myth codifies the values, the forces of an era, necessarily, cultural myth criticism must consider the manifestation of the feminine myths. We should remember that in the very heart of hypermodernity the dissimilarity of gender positions is restructured. Lipovetsky and Serroy, when discussing the logic of hypercinema, affirm that, after the 70s, films were giving more and more space to feminine characters who were also evolving in activity spheres that were traditionally closed for them (123). Therefore, myth must be also on the verge of restructuration itself along with the feminine.

On the other hand, Gilbert Durand (1992) taught us to read the stories in an articulated, structural, typological way. He insists on the importance of noticing the redundancies and repetitions in cultural objects as well as their symbolic arrangements in order to perform a more complete myth critical examination of the linguistic or visual space. In the case of series or films based on books, the analysis must be done considering their interlinguistic nature, as it is a space in which different languages coexist and must be adapted. Thus, reiterations are signals that guide hermeneutic exercise and lead to meaning. By presenting these feminine myths in interaction, *American Gods* compels us to analyze them as a reiteration that reveals the need of the imagination to present itself to the reader and the viewer for their implicit transcendent discourse, but always from the perspective in which the work has been created, the context of the hypermodernity that conditions this discourse.

4. The Goddesses and the Feminine in *American Gods*

Both Neil Gaiman and Bryan Fuller are artists deeply concerned about the role of female characters. When questioned in an interview in 2017 for British television about the reason for having taken an “artistic license” by portraying women in his new book, *Norse Mythology*—as in the case of Freya, goddess of beauty, fertility and love—Gaiman responded that he did not try to “take her away from the original,” as the journalist with whom he was talking suggested. Gaiman said that, although he was careful with what happens in the existing stories, he was just, in his own words:

[...] amplifying it, giving it color, giving it dialogue. So, Freya, basically, will not be pushed around. Where I have her explaining to the gods that she will not be sold off to a giant in exchange for Thor’s hammer, she just goes to their house and refuses to come out. That’s what happens in Snorri’s story, but what I do is to give her a certain amount of spunk in the dialogue to really make it clear that these goddesses were goddesses with agency. (Channel 4 News)

Gaiman concludes, before an almost inaudible point made by the interviewer, that Freya is “absolutely a feminist.” As we can see, there is a big concern in the author to foster the feminine participation in his plots, what we can find in all the seasons of the *American Gods* TV series.

For his part, Fuller had already demonstrated in the TV show *Hannibal* his sensitivity by giving a greater gender balance in his adaptations of stories and by even changing the sex of some characters that were originally men. That is the case of journalist Fredericka “Freddie” Lounds (Lara Jean Chorostecki) and the FBI psychoanalyst and profiler Alana Bloom (formerly Alan) (Caroline Dhavernas), who received greater prominence this way. Similarly, Fuller created the character Bedelia du Maurier (Gillian Anderson), Hannibal’s psychiatrist, and equates her in genius to the cannibal, famous for his profound intelligence.⁷

In the second season of *American Gods*, for example, Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, will have a more important role than in the book, where she dies very soon. Despite this concern, there is no radical transformation in the role of female characters or in the structure of their myths, because the creators do not set their work in the mystical structures of the imaginary but in the synthetic, according to Durand’s typology.

4.1. The Zoryas

According to Slavic mythology, the Zoryas or Auroras are Zorya Utrennyaya, the goddess of dawn, and Zorya Vechernyaya, the goddess of twilight (Dixon-Kennedy). Although certain versions of the myth refer to a third one, the goddess of midnight, she lacks a name. Neil Gaiman, however, named her Zorya Polunochnaya. The English writer thus gave her greater consistency and perhaps existence. The midnight character is critical to the plot of the first season of *American Gods*. The three Zoryas are daughters of Dazhbog, god of the sun, son of Svarog, god of heaven, and brother of Svarozhich, god of fire. According to the *Encyclopedia of Russian & Slavic Myth and Legend*, the process of forgetting these gods began over a thousand years ago, since “[i]n 988, when Vladimir I married Anna and converted to Christianity, Dazhbog’s huge statue in Kiev was ceremonially toppled into the river, along with the statues of other pagan deities” (Dixon-Kennedy, 62). The subject is not minor in the context of the history studied here, because it is precisely focused on the forgetfulness derived from the arrival of “new gods.” The same case is verified with Ostara, as will be seen. It is evident that history repeats itself and that the book and series repeatedly explain it.

Despite being daughters of the Sun, in *American Gods* they do not live with their father, but with Czernobog, the Black God, brother of Belobog, the White God.⁸ They live in a poor apartment, in Chicago, declining. Each of them naturally has a certain aspect and function. These goddesses have a fundamental symbolic weight. Wednesday and Shadow Moon arrive at the place to recruit Czernobog (Peter Storemare), but he is working, and they must wait for him. While they wait, they are greeted and attended by the oldest of the goddesses, Zorya Vechernyaya (a magnificent Cloris Leachman), for whom Shadow feels sympathy, perhaps because she represents Mercury, the star of the dusk, which precedes and accompanies the Moon. The cyclic character of the goddess is accentuated by one of her functions, the fact that she “closes the gates to her father’s palace after he returns home at the end of the day” (Dixon-Kennedy, 321). The goddess appears in the book as an old and emaciated woman, with a very marked “Eastern European” accent (Gaiman, Chapter Four), which coincides with her origin and which is very well represented in the TV show since we can listen to that accent.

The Zoryas earn some money with fortune telling. This divinatory aspect is significant threefold, since it implies: 1) the possibility of seeing the future, which frames them in a cycle of temporality; 2) that the activity allows them to earn some money to “pay the rent on time,” which inscribes them in a logic of consumption; and 3) that it is at the same time a way of making Shadow see that he is immersed in an alternate world, that is, that he is part of the myth of the “coexistence of two worlds,” although at this moment he still believes that everything is just a fraud, a trick. Here, we should notice that to earn more money, Zorya Vechernyaya has to tell lies, unlike her sisters, who tell the truth, since “the truth is not what people want to hear. It is a bad thing, and it troubles people, so they do not come back. But I can lie to them, tell them what they want to hear. So I bring home the bread” (Gaiman, Chapter Four). It is remarkable that the economic aspect, that of the logic of consumption, also conditions here the representation of myth.

In the series, all this happens in episode 2, “The Secret of the Spoons.” In a corridor, as part of the symbolic scenery, there is an astrological map that shows an asterism with the Big Dipper and the constellation of what was known in the Germanic realm as the Odin’s Wain, a resource that is extremely fortunate for the symbolic decoration. Zorya

Vechernyaya tells Shadow that the “family is with those who survive when you need to survive, even if you don’t like them,” and thus the immanence and a kind of association with economic aspects are manifested again. Before—she remembers—she had servants, and now they are all alone.

Next appears Zorya Utrennyaya (Martha Kelly), identified with the planet Venus, the morning star, whose function (very appropriately) will be to place a warning on the path of the hero. When reading Shadow’s coffee, she first communicates what she sees to his sister, and not to him, because what she saw is terrible. Zorya Utrennyaya, who is “smaller and frailer than her sister, but her hair was long and still golden” (Gaiman, Chapter Four), does not speak in the series, but she expresses herself in the book. It seems that this modification happens because these events occur in the afternoon, near dinner, not the time of this Aurora, which is a clever adaptation consideration.

Finally, Zorya Polunochnaya (Erika Kaar), the midnight star, appears in the next chapter, the third one of the TV shows: “Head Full of Snow.” Shadow wakes up and sees an open window, through which he gains access to the emergency stairs that allow him to reach the rooftop. There he finds a very beautiful Zorya Polunochnaya using a telescope to observe in the sky the same constellations that were on the map in the corridor of the hall. She tells Shadow that “the Buffalo is waning tonight,” which reinforces the astrologic and symbolic zoological decoration. The Aurora explains to Shadow that she and her sisters watch the sky day and night to make sure that the Great Bear (“one thing, and not a god, like a god [...] a bad thing”) continues chained up in those stars and does not escape and “eat it all” because the world would end. Thus, the Zoryas also have a protective role consistent with the mythology version (Dixon-Kennedy, 322).

Zorya Polunochnaya, in the show but not in the book, reads the palm of Shadow’s hand doubling the divinatory sense, although on this occasion the prediction is not threatening, but positive, because she tells him that he has begun a path “from nothing to everything,” which is consistent with the path of the hero as noted by Joseph Campbell (2008). Zorya Polunochnaya (declaring herself a virgin, which is important for fortune telling because as she says “virgins have the advantage”) offers help in exchange for a kiss, after which she takes the moon from the sky and gives it to Shadow in the form of a silver coin of a 1922 dollar with the effigy of Liberty, which will be an amulet. Here the female character also fulfills the role of an adjuvant, and the audiovisual resource is very useful to affirm it, because in the shot, from the bottom up, it can be seen that, when the moon rises, its light disappears. Finally, Zorya Polunochnaya orders Shadow to wake up, so he does not know if she was real or just a dream. Shadow, nevertheless, will have the amulet in his hand.

It is remarkable how Gaiman and Fuller match this Slavic myth with the story they tell, each empowering it with their own resources. First Gaiman with his high sense of the symbolic and then Fuller with his enormous ability to make something visually significant. The Zoryas will therefore be protective guardians who must guarantee the existence of the world and the beginning of a new day.

4.2. Ostara

In his search for allies, Wednesday wishes to recruit Ostara. Also known as Eostre, she is the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, fertility, land and harvest, in any case, associated with a fruitful restart of the cycle. This is Easter, and it was Jacob Grimm who in 1835, in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, recreated—from the etymology of *Ostern* (Sermon, 331, 335)—

the name “Ostara” as the Germanic equivalent and who claimed that she was related to the East and to dawn, much like the Greek Eos and the Roman Aurora. There are obvious similarities with the Zoryas, as can be inferred.

Ostara (Kristin Chenoweth) does not appear until the last episode of the first season, “Come to Jesus,” very differently than in the book, where she only meets Wednesday and Shadow at a picnic in San Francisco. In the series, on the other hand, she meets them at a party in a Kentucky mansion, where vegetation, flowers, trees and water surfaces abound, with a vast variety not only of food, cookies and candy but also of people inside, among them, several Jesuses. “For every belief, every branch, every denomination they see a different face when they close their eyes to pray,” Wednesday says when showing the Jesuses to Shadow Moon at the party.

As it is known, Easter is the main holiday of Christianity, and in this case, it is evidenced on the screen with a motley proliferation of reproductions of Christic denominations. For example, Shadow sees a Virgin (reiteration of the virginity of Zorya Polunochnaya) breastfeeding a baby Jesus and with a halo around her. The resurrection of Christ is tied with the pagan “resurrection” of the year, of life, of sowing. It is another example of religious syncretism so well perceived by Gaiman and fostered by Fuller and their team.

Scenography for this sequence includes rabbits (serving as messengers for Ostara), eggs, a figure of the Sacred Heart, among other things. When Wednesday explains to Shadow that it is a pagan party from twelve thousand years ago, a reproduction of *Ophelia* (1889), by John William Waterhouse, can be seen behind him, which reinforces the mythical feminine scenography of the place. As it is known, the English painter was known for his depictions of women from Greek mythology and the Arthurian cycle. In this case, a painting that places the Shakespeare’s characters lying in a field full of flowers is also a nod to the viewer who knows the literary origin of the series.

When Wednesday tells Shadow that everything people do at Easter, like decorating eggs, is done unconsciously on behalf of Ostara, he points to her at the very moment she turns to the viewer and a radiant glow emerges from her blond hair, emphasizing her attribute, once again thanks to digital technology. She wears a flowered dress and a matching hat. Shadow is beginning to believe in the existence of the gods. He sees Ostara chatting with a young Jesus with a halo. He sees how colored candy falls down to the floor through the nail holes of the hands of another older, gray-haired Jesus. These are important things for the revelation to occur that will happen a little later, when Wednesday reveals he is Odin and unleashes his lightning against the new gods.

When invited to participate in the war, Ostara refuses saying that she is not one of them, to which Wednesday replies that she is “as forgotten, and as unloved and as unremembered as any of us.” When she says that she is doing well, Grimnir, as he is also called, shows her the party’s syncretism and makes her see that the celebration is held in the name of Jesus and that therefore she has been supplanted: “Does anybody pray in your name? Do they say it in worship? Oh, they mouth your name, hmm, but they have no idea what it means. None whatsoever. Same every spring. You do all the work, he gets all the prayers.” As can be seen, it is an economy of faith, to which the gods are subject. The gods—both the old gods and the new gods—have been fighting to monopolize the “faith market.”

Shortly afterwards it is possible to realize that there is a third intertextual overlap after the Christian connections, because Ostara meets Media (Gillian Anderson), the

"new" goddess of the media, with whom she has made a kind of commercial deal for her to remain relatively present. Media appears as David Bowie, Marilyn Monroe or as Lucy Ricardo (the character played by Lucille Ball). This resource makes Media a character that adapts her image to the context and uses a sort of different "disguises." In this part of the series, Media appears as Hannah Brown, played by actress Judy Garland in the very successful 1948 film significantly titled *Easter Parade*. The encounter between the old and the new goddesses is full of hypocrisy, and by the tone in which they speak one can perceive that it is a cordial relationship by obligation, a business relationship. Media tells Ostara: "We popularized the pagan. We practically invented brunch. We built this holiday. You and me." Things start to get tense because each side knows that the other is present: the old gods now know the new gods just arrived. Ostara confesses to Media that she feels "poorly represented in the media," in reply to which the new goddess demands that Ostara drown that feeling, and in that way, she launches a threat by telling Ostara that what is at stake is "religious Darwinism: adapt and survive."

Ostara finally agrees to what Wednesday asked—"Show them who you are"—to force people to pray to them using her powers against humans. "She withholds, she returns. Prayer, reward. The ancient contract," says Odin. Ostara's rebellion makes everything dry and gray, which is shown in an impressive scene that gradually transforms the colors of life into the colors of death, in an imposing manifestation of the power of feminine myth, by drying the fields and the sown, reversing life that was unfolding. Ostara's face and body are covered with rose petals and her hair is released and loosened when she demonstrates her enormous power, because when she shows it, she finally expresses herself as she really is and feels satisfied. This is how the war between the old and new gods is formally declared.

5. Conclusions

In the 1950s, Karl Kerényi understood very well the essence of mythology in modern times and highlighted its dynamic and material nature linked to permanent creation. For the Hungarian scholar, mythology is an art united and consubstantial with poetry. The mythologems, that is, "the ancient elements transmitted by tradition [...] that deal with gods and divine beings, fighting heroes and descent into hell [...] do not exclude the continuation of another more advanced creation" (2012, 17, our translation). *American Gods* is one of these creations and those of the goddesses discussed here are among recreations. For all that they add, the elements of audiovisual production—hypermodern but contained by a sense of Fuller's *mythologemized* imagination—make images progress, as Kerényi points out, in a way that "becomes a work of art" (2012, 17, our translation).

Gilbert Durand (1992, 403) describes cyclic symbols as the basis of the synthetic structures of the imaginary, with an orientation to a universal totalizing harmonization constituted by astrobiological systems. This *principe de l'harmonisation* functions not only at the level of seasonal or biological opposites, but also in the constant and reciprocal passage from the macrocosm to the human microcosm. As can be seen, it is the principle that conveys the function of the feminine part of the cosmos represented by the goddesses that we have analyzed here. The synthesis is not a unification like mysticism, it does not point to the confusion of terms, but to the coherence that safeguards distinctions, oppositions. As we said before, cyclic symbols communicate the desire to defeat death "operating on the substance of time itself, domesticating the future" (Durand, 1992, 321, our translation).

The principle of harmonization is the one that transmits to women the function of the feminine part of the cosmos represented by the goddesses that we have analyzed here. Cyclic symbols play to communicate the desire to defeat death. That is exactly what the Zoryas and Ostara represent. The Moon appears as the first measure of time (Durand 1992, 326) and the lunar symbolism of the Zoryas—especially the one attached to Zorya Polunochnaya—is the one that leads this protection against time, that is, against death. The Moon in the form of a coin will save Shadow Moon from total darkness and will give him the chance to resurrect the world of the gods in an apotheosis narrated in chapter sixteen of the book (Gaiman, 438-451). On the other hand, the year marks the precise point where imagination dominates the contingent fluidity of time through a spatial figure, and this annual cycle is the one represented by Ostara, which can also embody, as we saw, a “*réhabilitation mythique du mal*” (using terminology from Durand 1992, 336) when she decides to withdraw her goodness.

The divine maiden and her fortune-telling sisters, givers of the moon amulet that matches the last name of the hero, Shadow Moon, and the beautiful Ostara with her flowers and Easter rabbits are artistic representations of the cyclical—of the day, of the seasons—and are here to communicate confidence amidst the confusion of hypermodernity. If postmodernity lacked hope and hypermodernity is characterized by the exponential increase in the values of modernity, then we find in these characters a kind of return to faith despite economic conflicts and the damaging influence of the media.

This feeling of uprooting is precisely what demands critical attention: it is necessary to recover, resume ties with traditions, with ancestors. There is no other reason for this return to myth in literature, arts and contemporary media. This is the reason of the presence of the myths of the feminine in the remarkable product that is *American Gods*. The TV show makes us reflect about the way we perceive and communicate with the sacred feminine “Now that we’re living in an atheist world,” in which it is difficult for someone to believe in “anything that doesn’t have a screen anymore,” as Media says, the spokeswoman for the new gods that is perfectly aware of the environment in which we live.

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Notes

¹ Divine immanence appears more and more and in many different products, such as in the remake of *Fury of the Titans* (Desmond Davies, 1981) by Louis Leterrier (*Clash of the Titans*, 2010) and the sequel by Jonathan Liebesman (*Wrath of the Titans*, 2012), for example, where gods die if they do not receive prayers. In *American Gods*, immanence is made explicit in the

title of the sixth episode of the series, "A Murder of Gods," which also makes a pun: murder means killing, but also a flock or a group (in the sense of association), as in "a murder of crows." It is possible that, for the dramatic tone and the theme of betrayal, the title is also a tribute to the excellent 1999 film *A murder of crows* directed by Rowdy Herrington.

- ² The animals are representative of the American cultural identity, both of the native and of the migrant, and they are present in a recurring manner in different spaces and scenes. Eagles and buffalos, for example, play a symbolic role. The eagle appears in the excellent main title sequence, crowning a totem that also includes a space rocket, a gunman, a meditating Buddha and a crucified astronaut, all between neon lights. This work received a nomination in the 2017 Emmy Awards for Outstanding Main Title Design.
- ³ The name of Odin will not be revealed until the end of the first season in a theophanic scene that recreates an analogue one coming from the *Poetic Edda*, in an example of intertextuality like those studied by Irina Rata in her article "The role of intertextuality in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*." Intertextuality is, in addition, a fundamental structural resource in a work like this, but the intratextuality in the series is another subject that could be studied elsewhere.
- ⁴ We offer here the original quote in Portuguese: "programadas para educar por meio do som e da imagem em movimento como reflexo do real. Falo de educação no sentido de treinamento para ser e estar em sociedade, no sentido de produção informação disfarçada de conhecimento, como fornecedor de modelos para viver coletivamente" (Wendel de Camargo, 24).
- ⁵ To find out about the prizes and awards that The Mythopoeic Society offers, see <http://www.mythsoc.org/awards.htm>.
- ⁶ See J. M. Losada & A. Limpscomb, *Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), to understand phenomena linked to this myth.
- ⁷ It should be noted that both Caroline Dhavernas and Gillian Anderson (famous for her role as Dana Scully in *The X Files*) have been recurring actresses in Fuller's series. Dhavernas had the leading role in *Wonderfalls* and Anderson plays the extraordinarily important character of Media in *American Gods*. Anderson even gave up continuing in the second season without Fuller's direction, probably because, as an experienced actress, she knows the risk of distorting the character (Bentley). In the same way, Fuller has repeatedly worked with directors, musicians and creative artists in one or another of his shows, which has contributed to the fact that he has been able to develop a particular aesthetic and a working group knowledgeable about the aesthetic that enhances the stories.
- ⁸ Both gods represent evil and good, associated with the color that is their attribute and the etymological origin of their name. Czernobog was the representation of evil, darkness and death, but in the book and in the series his immanence is verified, because with the passage of time he and his brother are now gray. The opposition between the good (white) and the bad (black) is thus overcome, with a taste of nostalgia and feeling of weakness.

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Virginity, Wilderness, and Bows: Diana's Return in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract

This paper identifies and analyses the echoes of Artemis/Diana's mythical character in the construction of *The Hunger Games'* heroine Katniss Everdeen. Three main characteristics are approached—her virginity, her love for the woods, and her use of bows—with an emphasis on the symbolic potential of the heroic image reimagined and reused in the films. Then, the saga's explicit inclusion of the process through which a character becomes a myth in a society is analyzed, paying special attention to the role of repetition and to the dissemination of the heroic *ethos* expressed through spectacular actions.

Keywords: *The Hunger Games*, liminality, performativity, myth, Artemis, Diana.

1. Introduction

The traces of a number of myths, everlasting and reimagined, have been identified in many heroic figures of mainstream contemporary cinema, offering a clear example of the presence of myth in today's culture. In this paper, this recurrence is taken as an invitation to reflect on the permanence of myths and their functions in our culture, combined with a study of the mythemes that allow us to establish dialogic relations with other stories.

Heroic tales mirror the values and aspiration of the society that imagines them. They do so in an excessive and symbolic way, favored by an extreme temporal remoteness entailing a cultural distancing. This cultural distancing, however, continues to display and is still attached to the characteristics of the society with which it dialogues. This is one of the reasons why, in the modern and premodern eras, legends and mythical tales involving heroes or heroines were set in a remote or medievalized past, while in recent years there has been a proliferation of futuristic and dystopic fictions, which seem more apt to articulate a radical expression of the moral and social problems of the culture of origin. This is the case of *The Hunger Games*, a saga of novels later adapted into a film saga.¹ The plot takes place in Panem, a dystopic setting in which an absolute and centralized power reigns over an alienated society, and where a population of impoverished citizens is distributed in separate districts according to the rules set by the president through the violent control of the individual and collective aspirations. However, underlying this futuristic shell, some authors have identified a number of references to the Roman/Greek culture (Hernández Henríquez 2018), which become apparent when we take a look at the names of the characters living in the first district,

known as the Capitol. This generates a complex temporal remoteness, one that encompasses both a past *and* a present of today's society, and within whose framework the two of them are stylized in accordance with our political and historical reference tales.

At the beginning of the movie saga, the events take place in this dystopic environment, which is presented as the best possible social organization after a civil war among the districts. Every year, as a reminder of that time, the Capitol organizes a series of televised *games*—a euphemism for battle—confronting participants (*tributes*) of every district. The winner is the participant that manages to finish the game alive. The games are a big TV event whose target and main supporters are the people living in the Capitol. They are the ones responsible for turning the tributes into popular characters in the days that precede the players' arrival to the set where the battle will be hosted in the format of a reality show.

During those days, the tributes' goal is to find sponsors. The number of sponsors achieved by each tribute depends on their popularity, which results from a combination of their personal skills and the marketing strategies set up by their team (composed by a manager, a coach, a fashion designer, etc.). This is the context of Katniss' world. Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) is the heroine of the saga, the one that the politically engaged and disappointed citizens choose to be a symbol for the rebellion, and whom the rest see as a celebrity they can follow and admire. The films show the gradual consolidation of a revolt that was dormant in District 13, even though it had a number of supporters in different circles of Panem. Katniss' popularity is seen by the rebels as an opportunity to spread the revolution and attack the Capitol. In this light, *The Hunger Games*' plot prompts a reflection on heroism based on its thematization of two main factors: 1) the construction of the mythical figure, and 2) the role that exemplarity and entertainment play in that construction. In Antiquity, *prodesse* and *delectare* (teaching and entertaining) were considered as two well differentiated functions of rhetoric communication. However, these notions evolved throughout history. In the Middle Ages, following Horace's teachings, they were brought together as two inherent aspects of a good literary work. According to this, a literary work was considered good only when it integrated these two components, that is, when it managed to teach something while entertaining the reader. Therefore, the myths and legends included in medieval treatises were used not only as a way to emphasize or illustrate a moral lesson, but also, they provided variety and entertainment. Also, in this kind of books, the heroes of the stories performed their virtue, that is, they showed their moral quality through good actions that became the center of the tale. These actions, especially those performed at the climax of the story, summarize for recipients not only the myth but also the virtues of the heroes. In manuscripts, these images were usually portrayed in illustrations or miniatures, sculptures or paintings. Therefore, an image can invoke a myth and its lesson, and it becomes a symbol easy to place in different cultural and artistic contexts.

In 1997, Disney revisited the entertainment-related devices of heroic tales, this time in terms of capitalism: in a hilarious sequence of the film that takes his name, Hercules becomes a celebrity that even has his own merchandising line. Here the market makes profit out of the image, and we can question the capability of this commodified image in terms of myth transmission. In the same way, the abandon of heroism as an ethical value in favor of the symbol's fame—understood as a product that can be economically exploited—contrasts with classical heroism in the characterization of Katniss. The

heroine is set in the context of show business—she is depicted as a participant in a reality show. Not only is she forced to take part in morbid interviews produced by the Capitol, but also, she is the face of the promotional videos of the rebellious section, created in District 13. This is a good example of how the saga (as pointed out earlier) questions the construction of heroic and mythical tales. It brings this process to our reality, where symbolic images potentially recall myths or just the values that these stories once developed. But, more importantly, in this way, *The Hunger Games* challenges the malleability of the very meaning of the myth and symbol, as it uses Katniss' manipulation by different sections (and for different purposes) as a *leitmotiv*. Profit and entertainment go hand in hand.

1. Artemis/Diana and The Hunger Games

The Hunger Games replicates a process that takes place in every culture. Since their foundation, myths have been and still are reimagined and placed in different contexts to suit the needs of the creator of the particular discourses that address the myths (such as novels or movies), reformulating them—hence their anthropological and sociological interest (not surprisingly, Gilbert Durand's *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, one of the founding works of myth criticism, approaches its subjects of study from the frameworks of anthropology and sociology). Despite living in a dystopian world, a diachronic reading reveals that Katniss is not that different from the mythical heroines that have populated the Western culture since the classical era.

Different critics have identified the echoes of several myths in Katniss and in *The Hunger Games*, such as Theseus's courage and sacrifice or Persephone's lack of agency when she must meet her annual obligation.² The potent symbolic loading of every component of the tale has been approached, too³—one of the most revealing being the connection between the image of Katniss and that of Diana/Artemis, constructed after a set of common characteristics. One of the *Homeric Hymns*, attributed to Hesiod, is devoted to Artemis and refers to the goddess as follows:

I sing of Artemis, whose shafts are of gold, who cheers on the hounds, the pure maiden, shooter of stags, who delights in archery, own sister to Apollo with the golden sword. Over the shadowy hills and windy peaks she draws her golden bow, rejoicing in the chase, and sends out grievous shafts. (Evelyn-White 1920, 453)

In this text, we can already identify the constant attributes of Artemis' mythical image: her bow and arrows, her virginity, and the wilderness of her surroundings.⁴ This is the same image that Katniss projects, allowing us to connect both heroines. However, this does not imply a semantic identity, since, as Durand pointed out, it is necessary to consider “the non-linearity of images and their semanticity” (1999, 34). In any case, the construction of the image of the heroine around these three elements should be examined.

3. Virginity: Pollution and Liminality

Katniss' virginity is represented through her rejection of romantic love, a cliché to which the plot repeatedly returns throughout the three films of the saga. In the *Homeric Hymn* dedicated to Aphrodite, the text emphasizes Artemis' virginity: “Nor does laughter-loving Aphrodite ever tame in love Artemis, the huntress with shafts of gold;

for she loves archery and the slaying of wild beasts in the mountains" (Evelyn-White 1920, 407). For Katniss, the invitation for love materializes in two characters, Peeta and Gale. While they keep showing their romantic love for her, Katniss—as she recurrently states—only experiences fraternal (and never carnal) love towards them. Her rejection of love puts her in a place far from that traditionally assigned to women. This is a position that perfectly matches her role as a leader—we must not forget that mythical characters presented as intellectual leaders (such as sibyls) or warrior leaders (Amazons) are always characterized by their detachment from love and sexuality.

As is the case with Artemis/Diana, virginity puts Katniss in a liminal position, accentuated by her fondness for wild territories. Katniss avoids the company of men, but she displays masculine behaviors and attributes, which has been read as "a symbol of ambiguity" (Oliver 2014, 677). This ambiguity also shows in Katniss' looks, in the two attires that we see her wearing in the film saga:

The films alternate between showing us Katniss as Tomboy and Katniss as beauty queen, but they do not show us Katniss as sex symbol. (One movie poster for the second film shows Katniss as half princess and half hunter, her face split in half).

Indeed Katniss's sexuality is a mystery, even to herself. (Oliver 2014, 677)

Her actions and physical attributes also lie at the intersection of the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. On the one hand, she displays excellent hunting skills and is an expert warrior when forced to fight. On the other hand, she is in charge of taking care of young girls, represented by her younger sister Primrose (while she is living in the District), and her friend Rue (when they meet in the hunger games' arena). The combination of her looks and her actions express and conform her liminal *ethos*,⁵ which also becomes narratively meaningful—both faces transcend the mere portrait of the character and end up being two of the reasons why the districts decide to follow her. The physical exposure of Katniss' ambiguous *ethos*—expressed by her actions and her attire—allow her to move her fellow citizens, now explicitly turned into spectators, as all these details are being televised. Note that this transcendence of the heroine's actions that manage to move Panem's population is actually favored by Katniss' liminal position. As pointed out by Douglas (1966), the space of ambiguity, of non-definition lies in between what societies recognize as admissible and inadmissible in nature. The border separating both spaces is determined by concern, by fear of an external threat, be it a divine punishment or the awareness of any other kind of danger (e.g. threats to one's health or physical integrity). Things that are difficult to classify or involve some degree of vacillation between categories negate purity—they negate what, from this point of view, opposes peril. Katniss is a taboo, the materialization of pollution and non-definition. She cannot be controlled: she stands up to President Snow, she refuses to adhere to the games' rules, she even rejects the principles of the rebellious section. Again, Katniss' position contributes to reinforce her transformative ability: she is represented as the one and only true leader—a leader that is beyond the power of the media and the political rulers. Following Katniss, the rest of the characters come to recognize the way they need to follow in order to transform their reality. She is their guide to fairer world. Similarly, Artemis/Diana's model stands for an independent and solitary character.

The liminal representation of the character points out to the transition from one state to another. In this context, Katniss' nurturing role with Primrose and Rue involves and connects the motherly care and the task of being a supportive figure during the ritual of

initiation the games are. The connections with maternity become apparent in two key scenes: when Katniss replaces her own mother in the raising of Primrose, and when she asks Rue's mother to forgive her for not having been able to protect the girl and to avoid her murder in the course of the games (*The Hunger Games*, 2012). Along with this interpretation, another reading is possible: Katniss as a character that accompanies the young girls during the initiation rites symbolized in the *reaping* (that is, the selection process of tributes that is carried out in the districts) and the games. In his study of Artemis/Diana, Bonavides Mateos (1996, 212) highlights the goddess' roles as a protector of animals (it should be noted that Katniss never shows any affection for animals, but she does protect her sister's cat when it is helpless) and as a supporting, accompanying figure for girls in their rites of passage. Katniss thus proves her mythical and heroic potential, as a figure with the ability to transition between liminal spaces and to guide her people through them. In contrast with the potential danger inherent to abandoning the familiar territories (a control measure), the heroine is an incarnation of audacity, a quality that matches the ambiguous, polluted identity of the character. According to Douglas "some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order" (1966, 3). From this perspective, Katniss is the representation of a polluted nature, a figure that is able to break with the social conventions in her sexual and family life, but also as a citizen. This definition of Katniss as an undefined, ambiguous, and therefore enigmatic being emphasizes her portrayal as a mythical figure, which is also reinforced by its connections with Artemis/Diana's classical model, such as her virginity or her inclination to hunting.

4. Nature: The Real and the False

The woods are Artemis/Diana's emblematic space—a wild space opposed to the city, which is the known social space, organized according to a set of rules and conventions. Likewise, in *The Hunger Games* the woods play a major role in the configuration of Katniss' character. In the first scene in which Katniss is introduced in the film saga (the second scene of the first film), we see the character in her environment. Following a wide shot of District 12 (Katniss' district), the camera enters the heroine's house, where we see her taking care of her little sister. They have a conversation, and Katniss leaves the house. She crosses her district, with the camera showing us the streets and the citizens living there. After a little while following Katniss through her neighborhood, the screen displays a message on an electric fence: "No access beyond this point." The limit is clear, but a hole in the fence allows Katniss to trespass. She then enters the woods, where she hides her bow and arrows. The film focuses on showing her agility and her expertise in using the different natural resources at her reach while she is hunting a deer (which is Artemis's sacred animal). The woods are not depicted as a dangerous space, but as a familiar environment where Katniss feels at ease and in control.

The woods are presented as the origin, a balanced natural environment where Katniss finds the food she needs for sustenance and that she also trades for obtaining other goods. The usual dichotomy involves an opposition between the city (the social safe space) and the woods (the dangerous, wild space). The film not only dialogues with this tradition, but also it re-signifies by opposing the peace of the woods to the lack of security in the District, a precarious place ruled by violence and abuse. A scene of the first film of the saga proves quite revealing in this regard. It shows Katniss in her room at the Capitolium, which is equipped with a window that acts like a screen. The image

on the window can be "personalized" using a remote control. Katniss goes through a catalogue of default images: two of cities, one of a desert... and eventually stops when the screen displays a picture of tall trees in a forest. This image moves Katniss, putting her in a dreamy state that ends up with the heroine feeling distressed after she realizes that the woods she saw were just an illusion. The symbolism of nature as Katniss' origin and true environment is reinforced by the meaning of her name, whose etymology traces back to "cattail," as it is pointed out in the books by Suzanne Collins that served for the film adaptation and highlighted by Frankel (2012, 13).

The first image of Katniss offered by the film is very similar to that of Artemis/Diana: she is an archer and hunts for deer in the woods. The woods become part of her image, along with her bow, arrows, and quiver. As the plot develops, Katniss evolves into a symbol for the population living in the districts. Her image consolidates, too, with her weapons playing a relevant role in the symbolic identification of the character. This process unfolds simultaneously inside and outside the fictional world, and the promotional posters of the films are proof of it, for they always portray an armed Katniss. In *Catching Fire*, the second film of the saga (2013), Katniss has already become a perfectly recognizable heroine thanks to her weapons. The film opens with a slow-paced sequence built in three parts. First, the screen shows an aerial wide shot of snow-covered forest. The images are accompanied by a simple melody performed by wind instruments. This shot is followed by one of Katniss wearing her bow and arrows, contemplating the snowy forest from within. The composition of this scene, with Katniss crouching in the middle of the screen, radiates feelings of calmness and balance. The third part of the sequence consists in a close-up of Katniss' face that reveals she is actually in distress: she is in the woods, which to her are a space of intimacy, a shelter to which she can always return for solace and comfort.

The film saga shows us another forest, constructed in a similar way. It is a space quite relevant to the plot: the arena where the Hunger Games take place, which is actually a simulation of a real forest. As is the case with almost every single element in the Capitolium, technology reigns. Using a general control panel, the director of the show (within the film) is able to make the sun rise, initiate a fire or activate technological animals that attack the contestants, called tributes. However, this other forest, created and ruled by the inhabitants of the Capitolium, is perceived as a hostile environment despite Katniss' ability to elude all the traps. What's more, this fake nature becomes the *décor* in which human wilderness emerges: the contestants, alienated, are forced to kill each other by the Capitolium, only to entertain the population of the first district.

In both cases, the woods are beyond the social conventions that regulate the interactions between the citizens (for good in the first case, for bad in the second). In the same way that she rebels against the social order, in *Catching Fire* (2013), Katniss attempts to destroy the arena, the fake woods. In this film, the alliances among the tributes, and, simultaneously, among the inhabitants of the districts, begin to replace the previous atomization of the individuals. In this new context, the true enemy is outside the tributes' environment (outside the arena), but also outside the twelve districts. "Remember who the real enemy is," Finnick says to Katniss (*Catching Fire*, 2013). After hearing these words, Katniss shoots her arrow into the sky. This action reveals the limits of the arena, as well as the falsehood of that which seemed natural. It exposes the fact that the sky is but a vulnerable dome that collapses after the attack and, with it, the Capitolium's power over the tributes.

5. Bows: Performativity of the Heroic Actions

Katniss' shooting the arrow in the air puts an end to the games and to the main plot of the second film. It is followed by an epilogue in which are shown the effects of this action, anticipating the story developed in *Mockingjay*, the last part of the saga (one volume in the book saga, two films in its adaptation to the big screen). These two consecutive scenes reveal that Katniss' spectacular action is the trigger that *enables* the rebellion. We can thus read it as a performative action from the perspectives of both drama and pragmatics.⁶

Performative actions change reality. Very often, mythical characters perform actions that go beyond the physical or moral limits of the humans. Through them, they establish a new order or open a path for society to follow them, as is the case with Katniss. In the two last films, the process through which Katniss is turned into a symbol, the heroine of the rebellion, becomes apparent—even though this is a process that has been covertly developing since the beginning of the saga.

As tributes of District 12, Katniss and Peeta benefit from the services of their own personal designer, Cenna, played by Lenny Kravitz. Every team has their own designer, who is in charge of manufacturing garments that stand for the symbolism of their district. However, the relationship between Katniss, Cenna, and the symbolic potential of her attire—which is always bold and striking—is a constant in the films. The attires are a fundamental part of the symbolic representation of the mythical characters, which usually include some of the tools and weapons they use in their actions. In addition to the bow and arrows used at the games and that we can see in the pictures of the movie posters, the dresses worn by Katniss at the parades are always covered in fire in one way or another. These attires combining feminine dresses and fire portray her courage, femininity and exceptional nature, three of the qualities that are contained in the name “girl on fire” (her most common nickname). Interestingly enough, this applies to the last two films, too: Cenna has passed away, but Katniss finds the sketches for her battle costume, on which he had been working before his death. This turns out to be quite significant, since Katniss' outfits strongly contribute to differentiate her: they make her visually distinguishable from both her neighbors and the rest of the tributes, as Reynolds pointed out in his study of superheroes (26).

KATNISS: So, you are here to make me look pretty?

CENNA: I'm here to help you make an impression. (*The Hunger Games*, 2012)

In the first film, Cenna says these words to Katniss. The ambiguity produced by the word *impression* (acting/impact) characterizes the double path that Katniss will be forced to follow. On the one hand, she is prompted to play a role before the rest of the characters. On the other hand, the actions that arise from her own inclinations—the ones that she doesn't *act out*—actually make an impression on the people of the districts. Both of them are aspects to the perception of Katniss as a heroine and symbol of the rebellion, and little girls start dressing like her, and her neighbors are moved by the way she acts. This is an innovative combination in the construction of mythical characters, which are supposed to be of a different moral condition—an exceptional one that is revealed through their heroic actions and that cannot be retouched, neither for exaggerating nor for concealing it. The innovation here lies on the deliberate open display of the resources involved in the transformation of Katniss into a symbol, just in the same way that some characters become a myth in our culture by the actions of the media that elaborate a tale through which the exceptionality of said characters is projected.

There is a scene in the first part of *Mockingjay* that is quite revealing in this respect.

Katniss has been rescued by some rebels' section and accepts to act as a symbol for the cause. To do so, the communication chief of the rebels arranges a set for shooting short promotional videos for recruiting new soldiers for the revolt, with Katniss as the star. With a green backdrop behind her, Katniss wields her iconic weapons and encourages the people to revolt against the Capitolium. However, things do not turn out as the rebels expected: Katniss' speech doesn't feel real. Then, Katniss' trainer, Haymitch, shows up and says, "And that, my friends, is how a revolution dies" (*The Hunger Games. Mockingjay part 1*, 2014). In the scene that follows, we see a number of characters sitting at a round table. The characters of Katniss' circle discuss what caused the failure with the ideologues of the revolution:

Haymitch: Let's everybody think of one incident where Katniss Everdeen genuinely moved you. Not where you were jealous of her hairstyle or her dress went up in flames or she made a halfway decent shot with an arrow. And not where Peeta made you like her. No, I'd like you all to think of one moment where she made you feel something real.

Effie: When she volunteered for her sister at the Reaping.

Haymitch: Excellent example. [...] What else?

Effie: When she sang that song for little Rue.

Haymitch: Oh, yeah. Who didn't get choked up at that? You know, I like you better, Effie, without all that makeup.

Effie: Well, I like you better sober.

Beetee: When she chose Rue as an ally, as well. Effie: Mmm, yes.

Haymitch: Now, what do all these have in common?

Gale: No one told her what to do.

Beetee: Unscripted, yes. So maybe we should just leave her alone.

Boggs: And wash her face. She's still a girl. You made her look 35.

Katniss' emotions and her ability to move through her actions are at the core of the conversation. But for Katniss' skills to really work, her actions must be real. This dialogue exposes the dichotomy that, since Aristotle, has pervaded every theory on how the human beings should behave. It contrasts spontaneity of action with fabricating behaviors ranging from lying to the mere wish of adapting to social conventions or established manners. Both ways of acting tell us something about people, information that, according to Goffman (2008), consists of signals that can be *given off* or simply *given*. In the case of a mythical heroine, it is valued that her behavior gives true information about her extraordinary personality because, just like the film lays out, that is the only way her heroic function can be fulfilled. Only if she is true to herself, only if she is honest, will Katniss become a heroine with the ability to move her society. Thus, Katniss is able to do things with her acts in the way Austin describes it (2009). Her actions produce real changes: they transform reality because, beyond their mere practical purpose, they are able to move people. In other words: Katniss' actions are relevant because of their performative potential.

Her team's decisiveness to move others is approached in emotional terms. The second variable of performativity is therefore implied, that is, the *pathos* of the act. Classical rhetoric already considered the ability to move the audience to be an essential component, since, in this context, the viewers shouldn't by any means remain passive. On the contrary, an ideal speaker is one that is able to effectively communicate a number

of arguments and proof to their audience, but this is only the first part: they must also move the audience into action, that is, into taking the best decision. In classical rhetoric, speakers used different strategies for achieving this, among which were the *pathos*-based strategies. In the words of Farrell, "pity becomes—through rhetoric—a form of proof" (1993, 71).

In the same way, from the classical perspective, the *pathos* must respect the speaker's *ethos*, an ethical notion that comprises the behavioral virtues (which differ from intellectual virtues), congregating body and personality, as the body reveals the mind, and the mind influences the body. In our context, Katniss' actions lie on a tense place halfway between these two dimensions: she must convey her true self (the one that has the ability to persuade her followers) and, at the same time, she needs to carry out spectacular actions that move them, triggering a reaction.

In the end, the promotional video for the revolution is shot during a battle. After the video has been recorded, Katniss' true reaction to the slaughter in the District spreads far and wide across the communities. Full of anger and sorrow, she gives a poignant speech that immediately becomes a revolutionary spot with the potential to move people to revolt. The repetition of the action then becomes another crucial factor for the crystallization of the myth: only when repeated the myth becomes myth. The viewers—both intradiegetically and extradiegetically speaking—are no longer confronted with a decontextualized speech, recorded at a studio and replicated with the purpose to make it become a symbol. Instead, we are now given access to a story, a narrative that explains the character's motives. From that moment on, every independent image of Katniss functions as a minor secondary symbol, as they can now be understood as part of the story, of Katniss' story that is presented as a foundational myth for the new society that she helps to build. Consequently, this kind of performative acts, which not only reveal the character's *ethos* but also have a strong impact on the people living in the districts, can be considered repetitions. At an intradiegetic level and as signifiers of the myth, by being broadcast Katniss' repeated actions reinforce a content already present, both when she is participating in the games and during her time as a rebel they act as stories that contribute to build the myth. At an extradiegetic level, this repetition of actions reinforces the content of Katniss' story as it is presented in the saga.

Repetition plays a major role in the construction of the myth. This can be achieved through a rewriting of the narrative, but also by using the symbols that stem from the mythical story. One way of appealing to the myth by the means of a static image with great symbolic power is to represent the heroes and heroines displaying attires and objects that evoke their characteristic actions. This procedure, which was already common in the classical era through paintings and sculptures, is perfectly compatible with the idolatry promoted by the contemporary mass media—the events portrayed in *The Hunger Games* or the previously mentioned *Hercules* scene are good examples of it. Amidst this amalgam of repetitions, Katniss, as an echo of mythical Diana, is but a faded form that will be brought to life thanks to the meaning of the myth.

Thus, the symbolic potential of Katniss' image, constructed through her attire, her weapons, and her repeated actions broadcast by the media connects with a moral lesson and with a set of values that fill it with meaning, such as courage, justice and the protection of the weaker party. In the same way, that form adheres to previous mythical forms such as Artemis/Diana, and, through them, to a permanent meaning that has been travelling across our history for centuries.

6. Conclusions

Among the many connections that can be identified when approaching Katniss' character, this paper has focused on highlighting the echoes of the mythical figure of Artemis/Diana and her role in the construction of *The Hunger Games*' heroine. Katniss' virginity and sexual ambiguity, which have sometimes been read as a new gender/sexual option with significance nowadays, was already at the core of many female mythical figures. The mythical characters' deviation from the general conventions emphasizes their extraordinary condition and their ability to accomplish exceptional feats. Katniss' liminality is reinforced by the ubiquitous presences of the real forest (a place beyond the social space) and of the fake one (a context ruled by extreme violence). Katniss and Artemis/Diana dwell in wild solitary spaces, making them their home.

Liminality enables the extraordinary acts through which characters can express their heroic *ethos*. Very interestingly, in *The Hunger Games* the process through which these spectacular actions construct the mythical ideal is not implied but explicit, from the heroine's crystallization as a symbolic image—a repeated form that channels a meaning—to the repetition and dissemination of said image.

The last film ends with an epilogue outside the mythical imagery. Once she has fulfilled her heroic function, Katniss lets go of the mythical attributes. She moves to a cottage near a meadow—domesticated natural spaces—and becomes a wife and a mother. At the end of the saga, Katniss is an average person, whose past feats now are distant stories that she passes on to her children.

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Notes

¹ The first volume (*The Hunger Games*) was adapted to the big screen in 2012 and directed by Gary Ross. It was followed by *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013); *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (2014); and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2* (2015).

² Both the past and the future are used for questioning and modelling the social structures of the present. Moreover, in *The Hunger Games*, we can find several references to the Roman society, such as the gladiators' arena (similar to the Hunger Games' arena) or the use of quadrigas (or the chariots during the tributes' parade).

³ Frankel (2012) offers a broad study of the meanings hidden in different elements present in the novels, from the characters' names to the objects they use. Her analysis is based on a number of sources, such as etymology, history, and the zodiac.

⁴ These three attributes of Artemis are shared by her Roman counterpart, Diana, in most iconographic traditions (Poulsen 2009). To know more on Ephesus' Artemis imagery, see Nielsen (2009).

⁵ I use *ethos* here in Aristotelian terms, that is, as a constitutive element of ethics, but also of literature (theory of literature). In his theory of tragedy, later applied to literature in general, Aristotle states that the object of imitation are the character's actions, which are determined

by two natural causes: *ethos* (personality, temperament) and *dianoia* (discursive thinking). Therefore, from the Aristotelian perspective, being a natural quality that is revealed through the character's actions is what distinguishes the *ethos* or temperament.

- ⁶ This subscribes to Austin's speech act theory, according to which there exist a type of utterances that are not merely referential, but actually bring about real changes in the world when said in a specific context, by specific individuals—these are what Austin calls performative speech acts.

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Game of Thrones: Ser Brienne of Tarth and a Feminine Reinterpretation of Classical Heroes

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Abstract

One of the most remarkable aspects of the highly popular television phenomenon *Game of Thrones*, adapted from the saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by G.R.R. Martin, is the development of one of the most important feminine characters, Brienne of Tarth, and the feminist implications of this authorial decision. At the conclusion of the televised series, Brienne of Tarth is the only woman in the fictional realm of Westeros officially initiated into the profession of arms who attains the title of *Ser*, a designation that in the context of the story relates to knights, paladins, heroes, protectors, and defenders of their people. Brienne's knighting and initiation acknowledge her fighting skills, courage, personal ethics, and most importantly, her demonstrated aspirations for the defense and protection of the people of Westeros. Despite the long list of characters and their heroic deeds in battle, at the conclusion of the televised series Brienne of Tarth is the only character in the story who possesses the attributes and follows to completion the arc of development that configure the archetype of the hero, identified by important mythographers such as Joseph Campbell, Carol Pearson, Mircea Eliade, C.G. Jung, Gilbert Durand, and others.

Keywords: G.R.R. Martin, myth, audiovisual production, feminism, hero/heroine.

1. Introduction

One of the most remarkable achievements in audiovisual productions in the last decade has been the success of the televised series *Game of Thrones*, based on the original *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a series of epic fantasy novels by American novelist and screenwriter George R. R. Martin. The first volume of the series, titled *A Game of Thrones*, was published in 1996. Initially envisioned as a trilogy, five out of a planned seven volumes have been published to date. The fifth and most recent volume *A Dance with Dragons* was published in 2011. The sixth novel, *The Winds of Winter*, will be published in 2020. The televised series premiered on HBO in the United States on April 17, 2011, and concluded on May 19, 2019, with 73 episodes broadcast over eight seasons.

The ability of the series to captivate the imagination of audiences throughout the world is evidenced by the number of countries transmitting the television show and its high ratings worldwide.¹ The immediate fascination of the show on viewers also resulted in an overwhelming number of online forums,² where thousands of participants comment and share theories about each season and individual episodes, demonstrates that audiovisual productions with mythical, heroic, and epic content appeal to the subconscious of readers and spectators, independently of their level of knowledge regarding the functions of myths and literature.

Given the fascination of most civilizations with heroes, masculine figures who represent the human struggle and the struggle to acquire power, wisdom, recognition, grandeur, and honor, the development of a heroine who has an important role in the action of a story from beginning to end has wide-ranging implications for contemporary societies. The objective of this study is to identify Brienne of Tarth as the true hero/ine of the televised series *Game of Thrones*, through an analysis of her evolution as a character, which is comparable to the journey of classical heroes, their attributes, and her importance as a new archetype for the collective imagination of 21st century audiences. To this effect, I will trace the heroic journey of Brienne of Tarth aided by studies on myth such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949); Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or Cosmos and History* (1954) and *Symbols and Images* (1961); C.G. Jung's *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1969); Carol S. Pearson's *The Hero Within* (1998); Gilbert Durand's theories of myth criticism and myth analysis in *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (1992),³ as well as other resources related to the content of myth in audiovisual productions in the age of globalization.

2. The Archetype of the Hero, Myth, and its Function

Fascination with the stories of heroes is common to all civilizations and historical periods. In her Introduction to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), Pinkola Estés comments on the universal fascination of human beings with myths and stories of the past:

One of the most remarkable developments that crisscross the world, no matter how urbanized a people may become, no matter how far they are living from family, or how many generations away they are born from a tight-knit heritage group—people everywhere nonetheless will form and reform “talking story” groups. There appears to be a strong drive in the psyche to be nourished and taught, but so to nourish and teach the psyches of as many others as possible, with the best and deepest stories that can be found. (xxxv)

From those narratives and myths of the ancient past, the collective unconscious in all cultures identifies specific elements that in turn create archetypes. For C.G. Jung, archetypes are the most important elements of the collective unconscious, full of universal images and meaning repeated through time in the tales, stories, and myths pertaining to all social groups (4-5).

For Pearson, “Archetypes—the fundamental structures of the psyche, can help us decode our own inner workings, as well as the inner lives of other people, groups, and social systems, so that we can rise to the challenge of contemporary life” (x). On the importance of archetypes for societies, Eliade indicates that “The meaning and function of what we have called ‘archetypes and repetition’ disclosed themselves to us only after we had perceived these societies’ [...] hostility toward every attempt at autonomous history, that is, at history not regulated by archetypes” (ix). Campbell's theory of the monomyth proposes the idea that inspirations, revelations, and actions in heroic narratives are found universally in all human beings and cultures. Furthermore, this primordial understanding can propel humans into more evolution: “It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back” (10).

Historically, audiences are familiar with the configuration of male heroic characters, but in the 21st century, it is clear that the traditional patterns of cultural consumption have changed. Audiences are more open at this time to give the heroic archetype a feminine face and accept new stories and far-reaching myths, capable of resonating with both genders at that deeply personal and fundamentally human level that will propel contemporary civilizations into the future.

Since the early days of cinematography and television, spectators have shown a fondness for stories containing mythical and ritual elements that trace the journey of heroic characters and the symbolism contained in those stories. Numerous recreations of Hercules, Jason, Perseus, Theseus, Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus; their Nordic counterparts Beowulf and Ragnar Lodbrok; the Assyrian Gilgamesh; and the Biblical Samson and David confirm that myths of the past and archetypes of heroes survive through time and space to reflect and reminisce the history of their individual societies. Even though the representation of heroes is in constant evolution, the symbolism of the archetype and its development is not negotiable, the main elements persist through the ages in new narratives. As a result, *The Song of Ice and Fire* by G.R.R. Martin and the televised series *Games of Thrones* follow the familiar pattern concerning the quest of the hero, central to the mythological systems of numerous cultures, but in the end, it is a woman who will go through all the stages of that quest.

Although Greek mythology gives voice to a few women, myths and stories of heroines are scarce. In literature and myth, participation of women in valiant deeds and a positive impact on their societies is mostly limited to episodes within longer narratives. Generally, authors do not bestow feminine characters with deep moral, spiritual or psychological configurations or evolution. In the *Timaeus*, Plato refers briefly to the warrior goddess Athena as a “lover both of war and of wisdom,” and in his *Critias*, Socrates refers to warrior women who used to make war alongside their male counterparts in times past:

[M]ilitary pursuits were then common to men and women, the men of those days in accordance with the custom of the time set up a figure and image of the goddess in full armour, to be a testimony that all animals which associate together, male as well as female, may, if they please, practise in common the virtue which belongs to them without distinction of sex.

In other European narratives, Brunhilde in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, Clorinda in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, and the wives of the Berserkers in the *Song of Haraldsljod* of the *Poetic Edda*, are recognized for their courage and commitment to arms and wisdom; they may be recognized as models of inspiration for Brienne of Tarth, but their participation is still episodic.

Inclusion of women in audiovisual productions comprise a substantial number of superheroines, such as Wonder Woman and X-Women Jean Grey, Storm, Rogue, etc. However, it is somewhat problematic for audiences to relate to the superiority of characters with powers that transcend the human. Furthermore, many of the popular superheroines lack a deep psychological configuration for audiences to relate to their actions or the background that propels them to a quest. Therefore, few superheroines—with the exception of Wonder Woman, who according to Elisa McCausland in *Wonder Woman: El feminismo como superpoder* (2017) constitutes the epitome of a successful feminist icon—succeed in producing a new heroic archetype for the 21st century. In this sense, the story of Brienne of Tarth, a woman who is not conflicted between divinity and mortality,

but rather prevails in spite of her very human limitations, constitutes a momentous development. Martin is careful to introduce Brienne of Tarth as a rather unremarkable woman in terms of appearance, at the same time that he endows her with remarkable physical, psychological, and moral attributes, but most importantly, with the mythical stature and an arc of development comparable to that of the ancient heroes. Brienne's configuration and heroic journey appeal to the collective consciousness of contemporary viewers from all lifestyles. Brienne becomes a symbol that relates to the audience of the show as a personal encouragement to continue their own journey, corroborating Eliade's theory that symbolic thinking is not exclusive to children, artists, or delusional individuals, but rather an endeavor common to all human beings that comes before language and discursive reason because "The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality—the deepest aspects—which defy any other means of knowledge" (12). Eliade also indicates that images and symbols are essential in the construction and persistence of myths through time, because they frame the existence of human beings from the beginning of time:

As is generally admitted today, a myth is an account of events which took place *in principio*, that is, "in the beginning", in a primordial and non-temporal instant, a moment of *sacred time*. This mythic or sacred time is qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of our everyday, de-sacralised existence. (Eliade, 57)

In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung indicates: "The primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them" (154). A hero is a man *in principio*, but the recurrence of the mythical legacy that informs the configuration of the archetype implies that the 21st century is the moment to extend that legacy to a feminine character. In the Preface to *The Hero Within*, Carol Pearson indicates: "More people than I ever dared imagine seem prepared and even eager to respond to the call of the heroic quest with an enthusiastic 'Yes!'" (xiii). Clearly, in the 21st century audiences are still eager to rise to the challenge of remembering their shared human experience, to reinvent the myth of the hero, and to accept that the hero for our time can be a regular human with a woman's face.

3. Brienne of Tarth and her Heroic Journey in *Game of Thrones*

In the televised series *Game of Thrones* there are several characters who seem to be on the path of the heroic at different points of the story: Tyrion, Jaime Lannister, Jon Stark, Arya Stark, and Daenerys Targaryen. However, the actions resulting from the distinct archetypal configurations of these characters and their incomplete arc of development cast them as subordinate to Brienne's journey. Both in the battlefield and in their personal life, several characters experience self-doubt and suffer injustice, disappointment, terror, and moments that always require extreme courage and an honorable conduct. Brienne is the only character who, rather than surrendering to selfishness or revenge, applies this education to an expanding experience that allows her to survive and return bearing boons for her people, which constitutes a key element of the heroic journey. Mythographers agree that the stages of a quest undertaken by humans with credible characteristics of doubt and evolution are central in the creation of a heroic character. According to Bakhtin (1981), and perfectly applicable to the feminine (as with Campbell's definition of a heroic journey):

[T]he hero of a novel should not be "heroic" in either the epic or the tragic sense of the word: he should combine in himself negative as well as positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious [...]. [T]he hero should not be portrayed as an already completed and unchanging person but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life. (10)

Faithful to the historical realities of patriarchal values associated with medieval societies, Brienne begins her story unable to make decisions or take actions associated with contemporary models of superheroines of popular culture. Instead, the view of women in the Westerosi societies represented in Martin's works conforms to the traditional gender concepts of Aristotle, Saint Paul, Thomas Aquinas, and others, who maintain the inferiority of women, prescribing social and economic submission to men's authority. In the fictional realm of Westeros, the subjection of women occurs as it does in most Western societies. This subjection as Agonito indicates (1977):

[Is] twofold. One is servile by virtue of which a superior makes us a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin [...] there is another kind of subjection, which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subject for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. (85)

In terms of physical appearance, Martin also sets Brienne apart from the unattainable models of beauty of fairy tale princesses or the physical perfection of contemporary superheroines such as described by Kaul:

Much like their male counterparts, their bodies are hypersexualized, but their attractive physical presence is also fearsome and daring, not to forget that they embody an impossible physicality—a narrow waist, a muscular body and large breasts. The "super body" of a female superhero just cannot be attained. No human, super or otherwise, can sustain these anatomical dimensions. (22)

Since Martin is aiming at the creation of a credible human heroine or *mythos in principio*, in *A Clash of Kings* (1998), where Brienne is first introduced, the reader makes the acquaintance of a very imperfect character:

Beauty, they called her [...]. Mocking. The hair beneath the visor was a squirrel's nest of dirty straw [...] Brienne's eyes [were] trusting and guileless, but the rest [...] her features were broad and coarse, her teeth prominent and crooked, her mouth too wide, her lips so plump they seemed swollen. A thousand freckles speckled her cheeks and brow, and her nose had been broken more than once. Pity filled Catelyn's heart. *Is there any creature on earth as unfortunate as an ugly woman?* (344)

Brienne's lack of beauty does not make her unfortunate in her own eyes. She starts her saga as the sole heir of the kingdom of Tarth. Thanks to the wealth and indulgence of her father, the rebellious princess learns skills at arms from Ser Goodwin and has access to a variety of weaponry and armor proper of nobility, but her military training is expected to be a passing interest. As a noble woman, Brienne must continue the patriarchal tradition of a marriage of convenience to cement political alliances. She rebels against the expectations of her gender and position, fighting a duel for the right to reject the marriage with her prospective husband, Ser Humfrey Wagstaff, whom she soundly defeats in combat. Led by an idealistic infatuation and despite lacking official admittance into knighthood, which is reserved for males only, Brienne abandons the paternal house to follow Renly Baratheon, a contender to the Iron Throne, as his personal guard. Accused

and later acquitted of Renly Baratheon's murder, Brienne meets and pledges her loyalty to Catelyn Stark, the matriarch of the Stark clan, who provides Brienne with the quest that she will follow until the end of the televised series. Recognizing her talent as a warrior and her high sense of honor, Ser Jaime Lannister knights Brienne, bestowing her the title of *Ser* and bequeathing upon her the sword *Oathkeeper*, the most legendary sword in the realm. Ser Brienne of Tarth is the only woman in Westerosi history to become a knight of the Seven Kingdoms. After Jamie's death in Daenerys Targaryen's destruction of King's Landing, Brienne writes an honorable entry immortalizing Jaime Lannister's name and deeds into the *Book of Knights*, and goes on to become Commander of the Royal Guard, protector of the people, and member of the council of the new King, Bran the Broken.

Brienne's journey begins by questioning her position in her birthplace. She aspires to transcend the restrictions of her gender and be able to protect her people, thus, her most valiant enterprises are consistent with those aspirations. In her Introduction to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), Nicola Pinkola Estés indicates:

Almost invariably every story, myth, legend, saga and folktale begins with a poignant question of one kind or another. In tales, this premiere query may be spoken—or only inferred. But regardless, the poignant question strikes a spark to the engine that ignites the heart. This starts up the energy of the story; it rolls the story forward. The mythic tale unfolds in response to that single igniting question. (xlvii)

Once the poignant question appears, Brienne abandons the kingdom of Tarth and her heroic quest begins. Campbell's concept of the monomyth identifies three major stages of the heroic progression—separation or departure, initiation, and return. Brienne's completion of those precise stages, as well as the surrounding events and ancillary characters associated with the journey, confirm her status as the true heroine of the story at the end of the television series. In the separation stage, Brienne abandons her land and the privilege of her station, plunging into a journey of adventure, terror, misfortune, detours, and gratifications. This event confirms Campbell's theories that a separation from the original environment must occur for the hero to transfer his emphasis from the external to the internal realm of the childhood unconscious, of dreams, nightmares, and fears where the hero will become aware of and internalize all the life-potentialities that he never managed to bring to adult realization (12).

Brienne responds to her inner desires and to the mythical call for adventure. There will be an initial blunder, too, in the form of her romantic infatuation with Renly Baratheon. For Campbell, blunders are not irrelevant occurrences, but rather doors to destiny (42). In Brienne's case, this blunder is the door that opens to her destiny. Later, in Renly's service, Brienne crosses the mythical threshold into a world rife with corruption, betrayal, dark forces, rape, and murder. The symbolic crossing to another world as represented in myths is not an easy feat: crossing from the human world to the other worlds confronts the hero with gods and guardians—such as Cerberus or Charon—who impede the pass to humans. In *Game of Thrones*, these guardians are represented by a supernatural world of dark forces, magic, monsters, and death, but also by the ruthless defenders of a male dominated system who deem women the antithesis of anything noble or heroic, displaying unforgiving skepticism about the virtues of women and their capabilities to perform heroic tasks for the common good.

After Renly's death, Brienne meets Catelyn Stark, who becomes an important, albeit momentary protective figure, or the supernatural aid akin to those mentioned by

Campbell (63). Catelyn Stark is also a woman suffering the misfortunes of her gender, incapable of protecting her children after the death of her husband, Ned Stark. Catelyn provides Brienne with the lofty quest of her heroic journey: to rescue her daughters Sansa and Arya Stark from the Lannisters. The encounter with Catelyn and Brienne's unhesitant acceptance of her mission are consistent with Campbell's theories regarding the courage and determination of the hero:

The hero whose attachment to ego is already annihilated passes back and forth across the horizons of the world, in and out of the dragon, as readily as a king through all the rooms of his house. And therein lies his power to save; for his passing and returning demonstrate that through all the contraries of phenomenality the Uncreate-Imperishable remains, and there is nothing to fear. (78)

Catelyn introduces Brienne to her prisoner, Ser Jaime Lannister. Once the most celebrated knight for his courage and skills, he is now disgraced in the kingdom after his murder of the last Targaryen King, whom he had sworn to protect. While being escorted by Brienne to King's Landing for an exchange for the Stark sisters, Jaime confesses the truth of his actions when he is sharing bath waters with Brienne in Harrenhall, long before the knighting ceremony. In an effort to vindicate his honor, immersed in this bath Jamie confesses that he killed his king to prevent him from exterminating the population of King's Landing with wildfire, a green, extremely flammable liquid created by The Alchemists Guild for the mad king. What this episode reveals in retrospect is that Brienne's mythical instruction for initiation had symbolically started long before her knighting by Jaime; thus, the ceremony in Winterfell is not spontaneous or disorganized. According to Durand (1999):

The second archetype in which purifying intentions are concentrated is the limpidity of lustral water. Lustral water immediately has a moral value. It does not wash clean in proportion to its volume but becomes the substance of purity itself [...]. For Bachelard, the sprinkling of water is the primordial purifying operation and the main archetypal image. Washing is merely its crude exoteric doublet. Indeed, we see here the transition from a substance to a "radiating" force, for water not only contains purity but radiates purity. (167)

Other events surrounding Brienne's encounter with Catelyn Stark adhere to Campbell's principle that a "helpful crone and fairy godmother is a familiar feature of European fairy lore" (65). Catelyn Stark plays this protective role vouching for Brienne after Renly's death. Concerning the presence of an old woman met at the separation stage, Campbell indicates that since ancient times, this is a frequent event in tales and stories:

What such a figure represents is the benign, protective power of destiny [...]. One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear. Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold, the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side. (59)

Brienne's fulfillment of the promise to Catelyn takes her to perilous roads traveled at the time of a bloody war of succession raging in Westeros. According to Campbell: "The folk mythologies populate with deceitful and dangerous presences every desert place outside the normal traffic of the village" (64). Brienne's path outside her kingdom is full of danger, in a world very hostile to women in general. The Brave Companions, and other rapists and murderers who lay waste to roads and villages throughout Westeros

represent the mythical ogres and monsters of Campbell's monomyth recognizable in Martin's story. Brienne fights to the death with Ser Sandor "the Hound" Clegane for the custody of the young Arya Stark and avenges Renly's death by righteously killing Stannis Baratheon. Brienne is now fully committed to justice through arms and death. This is the dark path of initiation, such as also described by Campbell:

And so it happens that if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures. (84)

In Brienne trials, an aware spectator is able to recognize the presence of some symbolical events and characters that normally accompany the hero, which Campbell also addresses: Jaime Lannister takes the role of the mythical mentor who accompanies Brienne in her journey and the succession of her trials. Breaking with misogynous traditions, Jaime knights Brienne before the Battle of Winterfell, in the presence of trusted male companions Tyrion Lannister, Ser Davos, Ser Bron, and Tormund, the wildling warrior. On the importance of initiation ceremonies, Gilbert Durand indicates: "All initiation ceremonies which are liturgies of the temporal sacred drama and of Time controlled by the rhythm of repetition, are isotopic with the dramatic cyclical myth of the son. Initiation is more than just baptism: it is a ritual of commitment, of magical bonding" (295). For his part, Campbell mentions that:

The traditional idea of initiation combines an introduction of the candidate into the techniques, duties, and prerogatives of his vocation with a radical readjustment of his emotional relationship to the parental images. The mystagogue (father or father substitute) is to entrust the symbols of office only to a son who has been effectually purged of all inappropriate infantile cathexes—for whom the just, impersonal exercise of the powers will not be rendered impossible by unconscious (or perhaps even conscious and rationalized) motives of self-aggrandizement, personal preference or resentment. (115)

When Brienne becomes a knight, she receives the title of *Ser*,⁴ held in the story by noble warriors who normally exhibit great moral strength and bravery in any course of action. When bestowed upon Brienne, the title restores the heroic connotation that includes the protection of others. In works of literature the title *Ser* is an uncommon designation, but present in a fair number of different sources, referring to noble men as a general honorific. Julius Kirshner refers to the *Confessio Dotis* by Chirico di Giovanni (1 Feb 1464/5), where this is the customary treatment accorded to lords (230).

An important aspect of Brienne's knighting is that it legitimizes her use of armor and the wielding of *Oathkeeper*, one of the two swords—the other one is *Widow's Wail*—that were forged from Ned Stark's legendary sword *Ice* after his death. The symbolic importance of this event is remarkable: *Oathkeeper* now becomes an amulet from a supernatural helper, the defunct Ned Stark, whose bravery, honor, and protective nature are attributes of the archetype of classical heroes, which according to Campbell, "is a favorite phase of the myth adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region." (81)

Further commenting on the relationship between Jaime Lannister and Brienne of Tarth, a correspondence can be established with Durand's theories about two distinct types of heroes and their temperament, which ultimately determines their fate:

The solar hero is always a violent warrior and is thereby opposed to the lunar hero who, as we shall see, is a submissive being [...]. It could be said that transcendence implies primordial discontent, the action of ill-humour being translated into the audacity of the gesture or the rashness of the enterprise. (154)

Jaime is a solar hero by all attributes, including his dazzling physical beauty and prowess, his golden hair, his golden armor, the golden lion of his crest—but also the recklessness of his actions—the antithesis of Brienne, who does not act impulsively, disobey rules or break oaths, although her daring knows no limits.

The conclusion of the televised series portrays Brienne of Tarth not only as a heroic and noble survivor of numerous trials, but also as a committed protector of the people. Her strength, nobility, and new position in her society relates accurately attributes of the diæretic symbol and to the “schemata and archetypes of transcendence” identified by Durand:

[A] polemical complex and schema of verticalising effort or elevation, accompanied by a feeling of monarchical contemplation which diminishes the world so as better to glorify the gigantic, and the ambition inherent in ascensional reveries. (154)

4. Brienne of Tarth vs Daenerys Targaryen

Throughout the story, Daenerys Targaryen is a central character, presented frequently as the potential heroine of the televised production. Daenerys also possesses a considerable arc of development towards the heroic: She abandons her home after her father is murdered; she questions her place in the world, liberates entire nations from slavery; she wants to punish evil and protect her subjects. However, her nature and motivations are selfish and sinister. Daenerys sees the recovery of the Iron Throne as her birthright, becoming the reason of her entire existence; consequently, her quest is not the protection of her people. Her survival in the bonfire where she is able to hatch three dragon eggs exposes her otherworldly nature; it is also revealed that in the past Daenerys gave birth to a monstrous creature with scales and leather-like wings. Clearly, in Daenerys the prophecy of a Targaryen descendant with dragon blood has been fulfilled.

Brienne of Tarth joins Daenerys because of her allegiance to Catelyn Stark and later to Jon Snow. Throughout several seasons, Daenerys is portrayed as an enigmatic character in the televised production. In spite of calling herself *Mother* of several subjects, Daenerys is not nurturing or protective; she makes her subjects fight for her and punishes disloyalty with death. In the end, her dragon legacy overcomes her human nature. No longer capable of human emotion or compassion, she becomes a murderous tyrant, an enemy of all humans. In an obsessive desire to punish the ones who wronged her family, she kills countless people in her dragon's torching of King's Landing. Understanding her dangerous inclinations, Jon Snow kills Daenerys in the last episode of the televised production.

The conclusion of the show greatly disappointed thousands of spectators, who rooted for Daenerys's success captivated by her beauty and extraordinary supernatural powers, strength, and determination. Thousands of viewers saw in this character the true heroine of the series, hoping that she could make good use of her colossal dragons to protect her people. For a mythographer, however, the denouement of the televised series was the most logical possibility, the one consistent with the destruction of the mythical antihero/ine, tyrant, dragon, or selfish monster represented in all myths. Campbell indicates that:

The figure of the tyrant-monster is known to the mythologies, folk traditions, legends, and even nightmares, of the world; and his characteristics are everywhere essentially the same. He is the hoarder of the general benefit. He is the monster avid for the greedy rights of "my and mine." (11)

On the specific image of the dragon, Durand mentions that dragons, theriomorphic and aquatic creatures, are animals of devouring and terror (85):

The Dragon resumes symbolically all the aspects of the Nocturnal Order of the image that we have so far considered: the antediluvian monster, the thunder beast, the fury of water, the sower of death—it is certainly "a creation of fear" [...], as Dontenville has noted. (94)

Despite her close biological ties with Jon Snow, Daenerys desires to continue their incestuous relationship. Incest, a common practice in Targaryen families, was practiced specifically to preserve the dragon blood and its magic, as indicated in Martin's story. Through the ages, civilizations have known and feared the dark relationship between incest and dragons, as Durand indicates:

This devouring aquatic ferocity is popularised in all mediaeval Bestiaries [...]. Jung sees her as the incarnation of a "mass of incestual libido" [...]. In the Apocalypse the Dragon is indeed linked to the Sinful Woman [...]. (95)

Although writers of the series manipulate the image and actions of Daenerys Targaryen throughout the different seasons, in the end she is revealed as a false heroine and a cruel, chthonian character. In spite of her murderous rampage, Daenerys's unforeseen destruction outraged viewers and fans of the televised series. The backlash against the conclusion of the televised series, with the rather unceremonious death of the dragon queen, proves that modern societies, as Jung indicates (96), may have the problem of an impoverishment of symbolism, of not knowing the myths and lessons that have ensured the survival of the human race, and having rationalized gods and devils out of existence:

There can be no question: the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religions inheritance, we today (in so far as we are unbelievers, or, if believers, in so far as our inherited beliefs fail to represent the real problems of contemporary life) must face alone, or, at best, with only tentative, impromptu, and not often very effective guidance. (96)

To Martin's credit, providing such an ending for the television series, he recaptures the workings of myths and legends preserved and collected from all ends of the world and delineates the course of properly identifying good and evil that has assured the survival of the civilizations through the ages.

5. Conclusion

Referring to epic and novel, Bakhtin used the specific word *hero* to indicate the idea of evolution: "The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making" (7). Traditional studies of the heroic concentrate on heroes, since few narratives have heroines, but they refer to characteristics that are no different in men or in women, capable of reflecting the tendencies of a world in transformation. In the 21st century, a new recreation of myths must include the feminine as one of the thousand

faces of the hero in evolution identified by Campbell. The exclusion of the feminine in heroic narratives no longer serves the advancement of societies or the production of new narratives or audiovisual productions, because social groups are more open to recognize the contributions of women to the collective stories that will propel their societies into the future. The massive interest generated by the volumes of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well as the televised series *Game of Thrones*, have encouraged new lines of investigation in literature and audiovisual productions that address the resurgence of questions, problems, visions of the world, and another look at the heroic archetype for the 21st century.

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Notes

¹ According to Wikipedia “Viewer numbers for the first season averaged 2.5 million viewers for its first Sunday-night screenings and a gross audience (including repeats and on-demand viewings) of 9.3 million viewers per episode. For its second season, the series had an average gross audience of 11.6 million viewers. The third season was seen by 14.2 million viewers, making *Game of Thrones* the second-most-viewed HBO series (after *The Sopranos*). For the fourth season, HBO said that its average gross audience of 18.4 million viewers (later adjusted to 18.6 million) had passed *The Sopranos* for the record. By the sixth season, the average per-episode gross viewing figure had increased to over 25 million, with nearly 40 percent of viewers watching on HBO digital platforms. In 2016, a New York Times study of the 50 TV shows with the most Facebook likes found that *Game of Thrones* was “much more popular in cities than in the countryside, probably the only show involving zombies that is.” By season seven, average viewer numbers had increased to 32.8 million per episode across all platforms. The series set records on pay-television channels in the United Kingdom (with a 2016 average audience of more than five million on all platforms) and Australia (with a cumulative average audience of 1.2 million) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_of_Thrones#Viewer_numbers. According to the Hollywood Reporter: “The final season has recorded five of the six most-watched episodes in the history of *Game of Thrones* (the season seven finale is the sixth). With continued streaming, DVR and on-demand viewing and additional replays, HBO says season eight is averaging an unheard-of 44.2 million viewers through Sunday. That’s more than 10 million people ahead of the average for season seven.” <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/game-thrones-series-finale-sets-all-time-hbo-ratings-record-1212269>

² <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/film/news/a6415/best-game-of-thrones-websites/>. Accessed Oct. 23, 2019.

³ In *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire* (19), Gilbert Durand explains that myth criticism and myth analysis are related disciplines. Durand asserts the concept that literary studies must expand readings to other disciplines (mythology, anthropology, sociology, ethnology, psychology, art history, psychoanalysis). The literary text becomes a rich field of study for numerous disciplines. In 1990, according to Jane Chance, mythology and allegorization remained unfamiliar to scholars: “Mythography, the explanation of classical mythology that often involves moralization or allegorization, remains unfamiliar even to most

medievalists, unless they have worked specifically in the field" (ix). Within the context of mythology, myth criticism and myth analysis, the Greco-Roman paradigm is often utilized because of the wealth of epistemological models of analysis, but it is not the only one.

- ⁴ According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the Proto-Indo-European language root of the word is of uncertain origin, but includes primarily the element of protection: ser-1 To protect. Extended form *serw . conserve, observe, preserve, reserve, reservoir, from Latin servâre, to keep, preserve. Perhaps suffixed lengthened-grade form *sçr-ôs . hero, from Greek heros, "protector," hero. [Pokorny 2. ser 910.] <https://ahdictionary.com/word/indoeurop.html>. Accessed May 15, 2019.

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“Seeing” the Malinche Myth as Nomad Subject in Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate*

INDRANI MUKHERJEE

Abstract

How and where can we locate the Malinche myth in a collage-like perception of cinema as articulated by Gilles Deleuze? Cinema weaves and re-weaves myths in/through movement image and time image so that both the subject and the viewer perceive and cohabit terrains of our personal and public experiences in a relationality of “becoming” nomad. Rosi Braidotti adds that the nomad subject is a splintered non-unitary subject, in a rhizomatic linkage with the post-human condition of the Anthropocene that may be non-linear and non-gendered in ways of embodied ontologies of the “normal.” This paper argues that Maria Lugones’ post-colonial proposal of reclaiming colored bodies as gendered and rational becomes another way towards becoming nomad. The film *Como agua para chocolate* is explored as an attempt to map the Malinche as a becoming myth located amidst an epistemological and an ontological struggle of post-human “seeing.” Forbidden colors and bodies perform unique stories that denounce the hybrid, to consider instead a mosaic-like collage of differences moving towards affect and solidarities as a new ethics of nomadism. The collage is borderless like cinema itself where subjects and objects are in rhizomatic de/re-territorializations of movement image and time image.

Keywords: Nomad, colored bodies, collage, time image, movement image

1. Introduction

The present paper attempts to look at the Malinche myth as nomad subject in Laura Esquivel’s novel *Como agua para chocolate, novela en doce entregas con recetas, amores y remedios caseros* (1989) turned into a film entitled *Como agua para chocolate* (1992). Although Laura Esquivel herself was the script writer of the film, Alfonso Arau, the director of the film, borrows from traditions of Mexican cinema and the Hollywood style to play with stereotypes of the Mexican “otherness” to dwell on cliché themes of the revolution, border and identity. These clichés and stereotypes are reworked through visual images that highlight the Deleuzian movement image and time image as integral to embodied matter in movement. They don’t signify like words, rather they become meanings themselves rendering any other-i-zation irrelevant. However, this paper is not about how the film is different nor about how it adds to “the original” text or deflates it. On the contrary, it will dwell on its filmic narrative, visual language and its rhizomatic linkages with our perceptions and our memories of the playing out of the bodies off/on screen. It will attempt to map the Malinche as a becoming myth¹ located amidst an epistemological

and an ontological struggle of post-human seeing.² She is a polyglot and forever travelling across different linguistic domains. She is in this sense a nomadic subject who “sees/speaks” or “is seen/spoken to” through her own body and her mind with those of others.³ Slices of time surrounding each other move, touch and overlap each other randomly and intermittently. Deleuze understands cinema in this way so that one may be both viscous subject and object at the same time/space through shifting time and space. So, the viewer and the viewed (not only in cinema) share each other’s time and space, subject and object positionality to a relationality of becoming (Barad 2007 and Braidotti 2013), requiring ethical responsibility and accountability that present themselves with every possibility. This is rhizomatic and random in its scope and extension.⁴ We as viewers also become nomadic as we see the visual narrative of the novel because we become polyglots, rhizomatic and non-unitary subjects as we continuously translate and engage with the moving images. This puts the audiovisual subject in a shared plane with the viewer; there is no othering, hence no hybridity rather a collage, where every real and potential subject sticks out through her difference, with no scope for any kind of synthesis. Cinema becomes this site of myth making in its attempt at re-viewing Esquivel’s narrative over a time and space that continuously negotiates a presence/t with its ghost of history and of its potential myth making towards a collage of decolonial encounters.⁵

It therefore proposes to dwell on issues of re-telling of Esquivel’s suggested film script in visual modes or re-viewing in general and of disengaging with her imagined mode of representation in the said movie so that she becomes not an “other,” rather our own conjugations through her and also the other way round, that is of her through us as real or imagined. Both Esquivel and the viewers become an assemblage in rhizomatic linkages with everything else surrounding us such as our own histories, geopolitics and epistemologies, which may be visually challenged with colonial blindness or loaded with different kinds of etiquettes, ethics and responsibilities.

Postmodernism’s reckoning with rejection of mimetic representation rests on the splintering of knowledge systems caused by the indeterminacy of meaning due to problematic social entanglements with power and knowledge. In Latin American contexts, this coincided with the “boom” novels as well as with the “testimonial” genre; in visual culture, Third Cinema reached its plenitude in the Cuban filmography of Humberto Solás, especially *Cecilia* (1982) in the present context because it was a film based on Cirilo Villaverde’s classic 19th century novel *Cecilia*. This novel also became a film, just as the present text and context of Laura Esquivel. *Cecilia* locates in the realm of national identity and the oedipal anchors of race. Malinche, on the other hand, is one that breaks any filiations, especially familial, patriarchal and the national. This is nomadism, decolonizing and empowering. *Cecilia* on the contrary explores how black was colonized, altered and acculturated into a colonial gaze. It is precisely this difference of perspective that brings to the fore the historical-libidinal materiality of subjugated knowledges,⁶ which destabilizes the verticality of the structuralist “metaphor” to a Deleuzian “becoming.”

Maria Lugones problematized Anibal Quijano’s submission that the characteristic of global, Eurocentered capitalist power organized around two axes: “the coloniality of power” and “modernity.” This is problematic as it is blind to heterosexual and patriarchal normativity in terms of race and gender. Hence, she fine-tunes this submission further.

Quijano’s lenses also assume patriarchal and heterosexual understandings of the disputes over control of sex, its resources, and products. Quijano accepts the global, Eurocentered, capitalist understanding of what gender is about. These features of the

framework serve to veil the ways in which non-“white” colonized women were subjected and disempowered. The heterosexual and patriarchal character of the arrangements can themselves be appreciated as oppressive by unveiling the presuppositions of the framework. Gender does not need to organize social arrangements, including social sexual arrangements. But gender arrangements need not be either heterosexual or patriarchal. They need not be, that is, as a matter of history. Understanding these features of the organization of gender in the modern/colonial gender system—the biological dimorphism, the patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of relations—is crucial to an understanding of the differential gender arrangements along “racial” lines. Biological dimorphism, heterosexual patriarchy are all characteristic of what I call the “light” side of the colonial/modern organization of gender. Hegemonically these are written large over the meaning of gender. Quijano seems not to be aware of his accepting this hegemonic meaning of gender. In making these claims I aim to expand and complicate Quijano’s approach, preserving his understanding of the coloniality of power, which is at the center of what I am calling the “modern/colonial gender system.” (Lugones 2008, 2)

Lugones thereafter argues how spaces and bodies of the new world became inscribed/embedded within parameters of an invented “white rationality” that consequently racialized the non-white as savage and barbaric dimorphic male/female; they couldn’t be assigned any gender as they were outside of the rational. Hence these bodies and spaces were “seen” as dangerous and ungovernable without coloniality of power. Seeing became a problematic materiality of coloniality as it highlighted the multiplicity of unfamiliar colors and contours. Coloniality of power is an understanding of colonization as a design, a plot to encroach upon everything including spaces, bodies and minds. That is how it becomes phallogocentric involving writing with the Spanish phallus of religion and language. Differently shaped bodies of different colors of the colonized were attempted to be recast through rape and Christianity and Spanish language, into hybrid ones. Colored bodies were processed to “becoming bodies” so that the process of “becoming” is not one of imitation or analogy, rather generative and creative, in order to give shape to a new way of being that is a function of influences rather than of resemblances. The process is one of removing the element from its original functions and bringing about new ones⁷ (bodies that were delinked from family, race, gender, nationhood, etc. in the present context of coloniality of power). These posthuman bodies were thus contending with forces that were violently coercive, masculine and driven not only by political or economic interests but also by sociocultural agendas premised on white rationalism. The latter represented so strong a fervor that the colonized subjects were either killed or processed as objects of the colonial gaze. Since these subjects were outside of the realm of the rational, they were simply marked as male or female, not man or woman. They were herded, moved and possessed in different ways. Latin America became a space that colonization had to “cleanse” and “sanitize” and “redeem” of its savagery, its alleged lack of history and culture and its soul with embodied Christianity, and Spanish language and “civilization.” Politically and economically it had to be geared up for Spain’s own profits as justification for enslaving of colored bodies.⁸

Thus, the *encomienda* system, the *repartimientos* and the reductions became the uniquely designed colonial panopticons in order to maximize exploitation from within a controlled space. While colored men were managed as beasts to serve as laborers in mines and farms, the women were managed to service sexual and other interests of their owners. Men’s bodies and minds and spaces would service the colonial economic agenda, but

women's bodies and minds and spaces were to comply with the political and social. The Indian women (and later their African sisters transported from the overseas) were seen as extremely lascivious and oversized sexual objects (or bodies) that had to be controlled. Their bodies were re-located outside of their indigenous set-up of social hierarchies, as such arrangements were destroyed. This way their sexuality was controlled and utilized to maintain a relationship of subordination between the colonizer and the colonized, setting in place the question of race and heterosexuality as a new "normal."

Mexican history becomes so contaminated with this design that it continues to be in place and to be deployed in the interests of the colonial or neo-colonial powers. Post-independent/revolution Mexico map these very issues of race to draw new borders involving racial profiles. Seeing became very crucial in terms of new colors, cartographies and contours. The Indian and black bodies were the savage others, though in the early twentieth century after the Mexican revolution, some important intellectuals, such as José Vasconcelos and Diego Rivera, attempted to bring these colored bodies into the mainstream, at least symbolically. Rivera's depiction of marginal identities in his murals was meant to give them some visibility in the history of Mexico. They were also meant to educate the common Mexican regarding her rich heritage of multiculturalism and democratic values earned during the Mexican revolution. However, there were others, such as Octavio Paz, who continued to fix the Indian element of Mexican identity with some reproach and shame. Representation has always been problematic.

2. Malinche between Myth and History

Decoloniality argues against the logic of European rationalism that justified colonization. Reckoning with the Malinche myth as nomadism is a move towards such an attempt. From among the most symbolic of the Mexican myths of the undesirable "other" is the Malinche, an alleged traitor and a whore responsible for Mexico's conquest by Cortés. Thus, she is associated with illegitimacy and treachery though she herself was at the receiving end of rape and humiliation at the hand of the conquistadores. Different narratives by conquistadores and colonizers have articulated the Malinche in different ways. She was the violated Mexican-Indian who was the conquistador's "tongue" (translator) and concubine occupying open public spaces. Generally, language and body were to service colonial agendas of conquest and miscegenation as decreed by royal slogan of "poblar es gobernar" or "to populate is to govern." Malinche's body was different as it birthed the first mestizo or mixed race that became another word for another language articulating another way of being. She was a woman chaperoned by the conquistadores, namely Hernán Cortés. Her body was "recast" to make her his strategic partner, his interpreter and his concubine. She could not be seen as a mere irrational savage with a lascivious sexuality. Bernal Díaz, a known chronicler of the conquest of Mexico, has portrayed her with some dignity. Malinche herself, either way, was not a passive subject as her multilingualism and her body were performing, defying, manipulating and taking control. She has been shown to be oscillating between a victim or a manipulator, both of which need salvation and male agency of liberation. Any agency, if at all, of this indigenous woman came with the tags of a prostitute, a public woman and the violated one who bore the first illegitimate subject. Octavio Paz had gathered this all up to finally write her off as "la chingada" or the "the screwed one" and has theorized Mexican identity around her with a sense of a "lack" that had to be hidden behind a smiling mask. She was the bad mother who had birthed the Mexican into a shameful and fatherless illegitimacy.⁹

Feminists denounced such representations and condemned the allegations that Malinche was responsible for Mexican failed identity. Their writings, paintings, performances or other ways of storytelling, would involve a re-interpretation that focused on the colored bodies as sites of re-conquest and decolonization and the “tongue” or her language potential as the source of power towards ultimate autonomy for the Malinche. This aspect of the Malinche and the contrast of Paz’s understanding of a toxic masculinist discourse of the woman as the “chingada,” passive and without agency, is significant. Malinche is thrust into a public space, hence visible, framed within a very important colonial design. For post-colonial Mexican women fighting caudillismo, machismo and racism, embodied language, hence visible colored bodies become another way of ontological struggle. This ontology constitutes a paradigm shift that defies the givenness of a norm, to enable an encounter with feminist rhizomic reterritorialization. Significantly, Frida Kahlo assumes and identifies with the Malinche and “writes back” with her body, defying the concept of body matter as passive receptor of male designs.¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa says SOY MI LENGUA (Anzaldúa 40). That is, I am my language, and thus locates her language and her body as a border of Spanish and American striations, not smooth space, breaking the grammars of both into what goes as Spanglish, which is borderless, grammarless and fluid. There are very many young people of the present generation who continue to reweave, reprocess and delink this myth from coloniality of power in order to enter into nomadic ontologies and epistemologies of alternate ethnic and gendered identities around the becoming Malinche. This is the exact opposite of Paz’s post-colonial concept of hardened and masked masculinity that conceived femininity as vulnerability and weakness, reminiscent of colonialism. Such hardness serviced the State, the Church and Positivist philosophy while Feminist language and bodies went contrary to it. Liberal Nationalists also contributed to this re-invention through painting as they helped a vast majority of illiterate people to relate to dominant ideologies of nationalism in order to facilitate a pan-continental sense of belonging and unity that could reckon with and counter the colonizing forces of oppression and slavery. It also served to fill in the sense of orphanhood and illegitimacy of the mixed identity and flaunt it as the legitimate national Mexican identity as against the “purity of blood syndrome” of the colonizers. The otherization of the Malinche and the invention of the Virgin of Guadalupe, both as visible colored image and concept, was a way of compromise and compliance towards this end.¹¹

3. The Film *Como agua para chocolate*

Laura Esquivel’s narrative, especially the novel, is a parody of the nineteenth century publication of women’s fiction in the form of a monthly serial. Such publications contained home remedies, recipes, dressmaking tips, lace designs, moral advice and some such things common in women’s magazines today. The novel is a parody in the same way that *Don Quixote* was of the chivalrous novels, sited in popular culture.¹² This is almost completely invisible in the film that complicates the novelistic narrative by fiddling with different layers of embodied histories and fiction.

The film retells the story of Mexican revolution (1910-1920) from the perspective of Tita’s great grandniece who discovers and inherits her diary. The myth woven around the historical figure of the Malinche, this paper argues, is recycled as the fictional character of Tita as she manipulates her life and those of others through her body and her culinary skills. The narrative vividly explores the world of women of the then

Mexican society, through its intimate gaze into the lives of members of the Garza family, where the mother, Elena Garza, performs the rigid and patriarchal norms of Mexican society. The narrative moves through flashbacks of real happenings with Tita, interspersed with whisperings with the dead and also with her great grandniece's commentaries in the present. Embodied voices in the narrative become performing images in the film as in the Deleuzian concept of a movement image and a time image.¹³ The inside and the outside become ambiguous though they prevail.

The narrative traces the life journey of the youngest of the four daughters of Elena, Tita, who is at the receiving end of her mother's patriarchal dictates. She is marginalized and is forced to submit to the instructions of her mother who is authoritarian and plays the role of a dominant matriarch in the family, unlike the space and freedom allowed to her other sisters. She is born in the kitchen, where her mother messed up the floor with so much birth fluid that the entire kitchen becomes flooded, and when the liquid dries up, it leaves salt behind that Nacha collects and will later use in her magical cookery. (One may remember the tumultuous birth of the Malinche in Esquivel's eponymous novel (2007) and how soon after, she was abandoned by her mother.) Tita is not thrown out of the house but abandoned nonetheless, although symbolically. She is thus thrust into the kitchen in the company of the Indian cook Nacha and maid Chíncha who nurture her as she grows up. She is deprived of any affection and kindness by her mother, though she lives on the ranch. Elena, her mother, feels this way because her husband dies soon after Tita's birth. Moreover, the family tradition forbade the youngest daughter to marry so that she could look after her parents in old age. However, she finds the intimate corner of the kitchen as her most intensely private space where she can discover and express her own self and her agency through different culinary skills that she inherits from Nacha. The kitchen becomes that space of confluence and conflict where time and movement as well as places become nomadic. White cross path with the indigenous brown (the staff in the house) but they can diffuse these differences of color by remaining confined to the most invisible margins of the house. White is visibly the dominant color in the interiors of the Garza household throughout the film. Anything colored, such as the bunch of roses for example, which Tita receives from Pedro, seems to be scandalous and hence has to be hidden away. Tita however chooses the dark red rose petals to prepare a dish with tender quails that contagiously spread intense sexual arousal in everybody. The brightness of the red petals stands out prominently on the screen as it reminiscences an indigenous recipe whispered into her ears by the ghost of Nacha.

The dusty outside embedded in the revolution stretches into the messy inside embodied in the rebellions of Tita and her friends (the house staff) to not submit to her mother, Elena. This is no fairy-tale narrative as has been made out to be sometimes.¹⁴ Instead it tells a tale of hatred, passion, desire and revenge. The scandal surrounding Elena's affair with a mulatto, resulting in the birth of white blonde Gertrudis was revealed in gossip during the birth ceremony of Tita. Unable to cope with this shame, Elena's husband dies. She has to hide the picture of her black lover in a locket on her bosom. Her own life story seems to be a mythic reworking of the Llorona¹⁵ as she abandons the baby to the care of Nacha because she feels that Tita had brought her bad luck. Thus, black also invades the whiteness of the Garza house. Black, red and brown visually contaminate the entire whiteness of narrative of the film thereafter. The white in the household transforms into a becoming white¹⁶ as it gets tainted by odd colors of black, brown and red among many others.

4. Nomadism

Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadism as an existential and intellectual feature of her subjectivity is helpful to theorize on the becoming Malinche of Tita that this study involves itself with. Tita, like the Malinche, *becomes nomad*, both in body and spirit (through the culinary) who defies the conditions and constraints imposed on her through her skillful use of inter-spaces of opportunities and abilities of cookery, which she creates for herself amidst these very adverse conditions. Such opportunities appear as event-potentials that break any conception of binaries and dwell instead on undoing the hierarchical privileges of the former over the latter of any binaries. Instead, it is Tita's reach spanning the non-human (as in her friendship with Nacha, Chíncha and all subalterns, her acceptance of her blonde but mulatto sister), the non-life and the non-ontological (as in the end of the film where she chooses death in a golden blaze of her burning chambers) that empower her to defy power where power alludes not only to patriarchal designs of domination but also to understanding of it as a force that works on this design to make it seem normal.¹⁷ Many critics have seen this as simply a magical realist style as events occur beyond any realm of the rational. However, the camera moves that draw the spaces surrounding Tita articulate this unique "reach" with light, sound and movements that are fast and randomly moving in the Deleuzian way of the motion picture as also /nomadism.¹⁸ Nomadism is about a practice or a performance against one's own stabilized sense of identity based on contingency of history, arbitrariness of language, affective desires, and unstable epistemologies. In the sense of coloniality of power, it may be seen as a kind of anti-writing, which is significant, given that in Latin America, writing was equivalent to colonizing and the imposition of modernity.¹⁹

Tita reminisces rhizomatic moves that seem to grope through inter-spaces of her kitchen and the unknown and inhospitable zones of the world outside (the revolution) that defy modernist normativity for linear, coherent and unified narrative. Instead they invoke gestating thinking that will birth new grounds of a disturbing and distinct epistemological order through defiance of and deviance from any condescending and compromising situation of recolonization and surrender. In order to further explore this, Tita can be read through and in conjunction with the phenomenon of thinking around Malinche. She contradicts the national narrative that has traditionally demeaned her, as has been seen in the works of Paz. Laura Esquivel has brought this to light in her novel on the Malinche and has emphasized the ways in which she exercises her own agency through difficult situations that she was forced to bear. Tita's unique culinary skills in the domesticated space of the kitchen can be interpreted as nomadism in the same way as Malinche's translation skills through the Mexican landscape. One's knowledge and control of the kitchen and the other's familiarity with the Mexican terrain were acquired as they were condemned to inhabit them because their respective mothers dispossessed them from familial affection and security for selfish motives. However, Malinche and Tita reclaim their agency through their respective embodied experiences of the Mexican histories. The interrelations, which both Tita and Malinche establish with non-prescriptive ways of being, are reflective of their situations of nomadism and their assertion of their own agency. Nomadism is a way of being that is empowering and liberating as it involves a breaking away from prescribed ways of subjectivity in order to practice and live by their own agency.

5. Interstices

Since the human is white, male and rational, and at the helm of all life and earth matters, the posthuman is all others such as colored, gendered, flora and fauna, earth, rivers and oceans or cyborgs, monsters, vampires, real or imagined, virtual or real, etc. in relationships of mutuality, randomness and casual (rhizomatic) linkages. Posthumanism denies any beginnings or ends, chronologies or clock time.

Posthumanist hybridity today is all-encompassing and beyond the human paradigm, crossing threshold with the animal world as well as with the material one. Entanglements and complex root-weavings connect all creatures, thoughts and the materials as knowledge gets de-privileged in multiple ways, patterns and traces. Knowledge flows through everywhere, not necessarily as an adjunct of power, consuming up all spatiality of status quo and predictability to conceive, gestate and birth hitherto unknown worlds embedded in the realm of the known. Feminism, in this context, entails negotiating with all interstices as nomadic, as it contests and contends conflicting unstable borders moving along, so that they continue to remain borders. There is no scope of any blending.

Very interesting example in this context is that of the three Garza sisters as rhizomic becomings of different kinds of female stereotypes; thus, what strikes is that Rosaura performs the role of a domesticated submissive woman while Gertrudis, that of a prostitute. Rosaura is the Virgin who birthed a baby, but her breasts were dry and without milk. Gertrudis, on the other hand, is the result of her mother's affair with a mulatto, though she is blonde and white, as we saw. She is no good at any domestic work, sexually open and dares to run away naked with a revolutionary adventurer until she becomes a commander of her own troop of men with arms. Each one remains within her personal bodily dispositions.

Tita is the most problematic of them all as she slips between domesticity and sexuality, jumping from her Anthropocene instability to a "becoming" nomad.²⁰ She can breastfeed Rosaura's baby and at the same time induce sexual arousing through her culinary prowess in the kitchen. She can be rational and also magical, thus reclaiming her gender through the rational or the magical. This space that she occupies through her breasts and her hands is an enabling embodied space as it allows her to stretch the space into the prohibited outside. Malinche's love and language corresponds to Tita's indulgence in desire and pleasure intertwined with her skill to feed, to sustain, to nurture and to care. She becomes the clandestine lover and the magical nanny, subverting the givenness of any understanding of a breast giver. Maria Lugones' concept of the re-gendering of racialized (and therefore visible) bodies underscores Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjects that break free from logocentric, linear narratives of an "Oedipal plot,"²¹ liberating nomadism from any passive unbelonging into a powerful non-space, a plateau that is striated, non-white, nomadic and unstable. Braidotti argues:

One of the strengths of feminist theory is the desire to leave behind a linear mode of intellectual thinking, the teleologically ordained style of argumentation most of us have been trained to respect and emulate. In my experience this results in encouraging repetition and dutifulness to a canonical tradition that enforces the sanctimonious sacredness of certain texts: the texts of the great philosophical humanistic tradition. I would like to oppose to them a passionate form of posthumanism based on feminist nomadic ethics.²² More especially, I see it as essential that women break free from

what Teresa de Lauretis, the Italian American feminist theorist describes as “the Oedipal plot” of theoretical work. (Braidotti 1994, 29)

Add to this Braidotti’s argument about the limitations of phallogocentric approach (1994, 28-29) and shifting to other modes of representation. Generally speaking, both the novel as a genre and the movie as another, break and subvert the grammar of the phallogocentrism both literally and metaphorically. Movies emerging from novels become burdened with issues of fidelity in terms of a competitive politics of representation. Today however, matters of cinematic languages of close-up, panning, flashbacks and montage have argued in favor of a relationship of complementarity rather than competitiveness in the way that they work against official history or the Oedipal plot. As a result of the Deleuzean understanding of cinematic movement image and time image, there is scope for an encounter towards a becoming mythic where Tita as Malinche loops back to a body enmeshed in moving space and time as cinema itself becomes a myth maker of alternative subject-object positions.

This implies that the posthuman knowing subject has to be understood as a relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness. Two related notions emerge from this claim: firstly, the mind-body continuum–i.e. the embrainment of the body and embodiment of the mind– and secondly, the nature-culture continuum–i.e. “naturecultural” and “humanimal” transversal bonding. (Braidotti 2018, 31)

Malinche is a myth but located in history, fiction and folklore. She is an archetype, which is feminist, nomadic and on the border. She is a bad wife, a bad mother and a public woman. She is the “chingada” and the “other” of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Cinema works against such nationalist, misogynist and colonial myths. As it does so, it also re-churns them to bring to the fore other myths that are alternate ones. The enmeshed human body thereby induces perceptions that cause affections that in turn result in actions. The relationship between each of these categories is not that of causality rather of difference, so that they can be connected by an “and” rather than any other way. They become associated with long shots, close-ups and medium shots.²³ There are no unifying concepts, rather fragments of a schizophrenic subject, which stares back at itself in the mirror-screen of our minds as screens. Braidotti’s nomad becomes another woman moving between the ontological and the existential. David Punter posits this in a very interesting way as he borrows from *Malinche*, the novel by Esquivel:

For her, the spiritual world had an intimate relationship with Nature and the cosmos, with their rhythm, with the movement of the stars through the skies. When the Sun and the Moon had been born in Teotihuacan, they had freed mankind from the darkness. She knew from her ancestors that the light emitted by the stars was not only physical, but spiritual as well, and that their passage through the heavens to unify the thoughts of men, the cycles of time and space. (Punter, 99)

Punter has been the only one to research Esquivel’s narrative using the posthuman theorizing of a mythic-historic subject-object relationality of becoming. Braidotti’s understanding of nomad subject seen through the Deleuzean philosophy of time image and movement image highlights the problems of narration as a linear, gendered and “normal”:

[...] perhaps narration is impossible, perhaps the attempt recedes behind veils of presumed history [...]. Can the relics of Malinche be exhumed? What is the purpose of

that? A narration “among other possible narrations”; and so Malinche, alongside the family of *Like Water for Chocolate*, take their place in an uncertain, undecidable world of the past. [...] How to speak of the past without some concepts of the serious, some tinge of veneration, how to remain loose, unconvinced, floating when one speaks-or writes-of the tragedies that have accompanied the birth of most nation states. (Punter, 142)

Punter, like Deleuze and Guattari, alludes to “A speaking or a writing of impurity that is not yet fully cooked, not smooth, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, but striated” (142). The camera, arguably, becomes another squinting eye, a stone cutter, of unfinished stones of the ruins of a pyramid or a castle. It doesn’t actually write, rather it performs images so that the images in motion perform imperfect designs. It becomes impossible to speak and think or vice versa as speaking/thinking has become overused and overburdened with language so that it becomes very banal and trivial. Therefore, images themselves become the thinking, negotiating interstices and irrational breaks so that any interior monologue breaks. “The cut, or interstice, between two series of images no longer forms part of either of the two series: it is the equivalent of an irrational cut, which determines the non-commensurable relations between images” (Deleuze 1997b, 213). Deleuze proposes a thinking cinema that keeps viewership and moving images in a relationship of rhizomatic becoming. The nomad moves in broken pieces constitutive of a collage where the other cuttings are not contrasts, rather equivalences that refuse to synthesize. Tita, therefore, reminiscences ghosts of the Malinche in her other manifestations as well. The fact that she can breastfeed her nephew retraces another time image, for example of Frida Kahlo being breastfed by her black nanny. This is not a metaphor, rather a space between her real and her virtual self, a “fraternity of metaphors.” Deleuze elaborates on this concept, of “difference acting upon difference” (most notably outlined in *Difference and Repetition*). But this equivalence is also key because it is the refusal to synthesize images that allows the void to present itself between them as an interstice. The scenes where Gertrudis runs away nude with a revolutionary conman and Tita goes away with John (the American doctor who proposes to marry her) are very interesting in this sense. The landscapes are both comparable and so are the ways they are embedded and embodied; Gertrudis is fully naked, co-riding a horse kicking off dust, and Tita is over-clad with her shawl that covers not only her, but also the land she is leaving behind, settling any dust. Braidotti criticizes hybridity as a false construct of harmony due to global capitalism. So, while the film compares scenes, it doesn’t hybridize, rather it plays with a visible collage of different event potentialities.

6. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, seeing has become a political act that tracks the non-unitary subject of the Malinche myth as hidden and replayed, destabilized and rewoven by cinema as a process of becoming nomad. Further, it also relocates viewers as nomadic in the way we consume these moving images, given our own deterritorializations through surveillance systems of diverse power relations in advanced and global capitalism. Maria Lugones’ de-gendering of the colonized female subject of the non-western world locates gendering in relation to white rational subject. Malinche appropriates tokens of the rational through her translation skills, and likewise Tita, who has been kept out of the rational world by her falsely puritan mother, since she is adulterous, is condemned to submit to a degendered space as a new “norm.” The kitchen rids her of any entitlement

to gendering because she was not rational and didn't conform to European normativity of soft, mute and docile women. Tita, abandoned by her mother and growing up in company of the colored staff of the house, was therefore outside of the rational etiquettes of prescribed white women's behavior.

Tita thus becomes nomad and has good company in her indulgence with breaking up grammatically correct idiom in terms of her cookery, her skill as care giver and breast giver. Gertrudis dons this nomadism of her own free will, as she runs away with an adventurer. However, both of them reclaim their worlds through solidarity with impure embodiments of illicit relationships and illogical experiences. The Malinche myth unpacks a friendly rhizomatic link with the Garza sisters, flaunting and challenging our own situations of becoming women.

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Notes

¹ Becoming myth is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the term, becoming animal/woman/etcetera, as opposed to any filiation in *Thousand Plateaus*. Hence myth and totem or structure and system are problematic as they entail a closure of subject in terms of its given-ness of categories, classifications or distinctions. The Malinche as myth, in this sense, works against such closures as it is casual, accidental and random in the way that it plays with and destabilizes histories, fictions and oedipal deterritorialization. For more on this see "Becoming-Intense, Becoming Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible" in *Thousand Plateaus* (232-309).

² The post-human is a concept drawn from Deleuzean feminists such as Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad among many others. Rosi Braidotti argues that "it does not assume a human, individualized self as the deciding factor of main subject. It rather envisages what I would call a transversal inter-connection or an 'assemblage' of human and non-human actors [...]. Secondly, I want to emphasize the normatively neutral structure of contemporary technologies: they are not endowed with intrinsic humanistic agency. Thirdly, I note that the advocates of advanced capitalism seem to be faster in grasping the creative potential of the posthuman than some of the well-meaning and progressive neo-humanist opponents of this system" (*The Posthuman*, 45).

³ Actually, I borrow this from Derrida's submission on time image. Time image is about creating time layers with the camera so that the present and the past play on the same screen. This means that the real gets swallowed up by the virtual to the extent that the real and the virtual become ambiguous.

⁴ For more on this see *Movement Image* where he talks about different slices of space that the camera plays with. He analyses Oscar Welles' *Citizen Kane* to illustrate this.

⁵ By this I not only refer to Anibal Quijano's understanding of decoloniality as a way to affront advanced capitalist trends to encroach upon any other civilizations, but also to disengage it from an understanding that normalizes coloniality as linked only to the non-western.

⁶ Subjugated knowledges refer to knowledges that have been delegitimized, rendered irrelevant or simply disqualified due to hegemonic narratives such as monism, colonization or moral universalism.

⁷ See Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 (275-276).

⁸ For nineteenth century Latin American history, see Walter Mignolo.

⁹ For more on this see Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude*.

¹⁰ Kahlo regularly dressed herself in precolonial Indigenous costume that resisted the strictures of a colonial gender normativity. As she embraced the identity of the indigenous people, it allowed her to deconstruct and re-codify the signs of the Malinche as la chingada in order to subvert through language and body, a decolonial act. In a self-portrait entitled *The Mask* (1945), Kahlo covers her face behind a papier-mâché caricature of the Malinche. In this conflicted character Kahlo found a mirror for her own anxieties, sometimes signing her letters "Frida, La Malinche" (See "Frida Kahlo: Room Guide: Room 9 Self-Portraits in <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/frida-kahlo/frida-kahlo-room-guide/frida-kahlo-room-guide-room-9>. Accessed on Jan. 5., 2020).

¹² The Virgin of Guadalupe is a painting of an indigenous looking Madonna in Mexico.

¹² For more on this, see Maria Elena de Valdes' article.

¹³ Deleuze contests the idea that cinema is a succession of still images to argue that cinema is comprised of movement images, which are camera dependent and hence objective, mobile and non-linear. The camera can see from where no human can; it can also move on its own and can turn to flashbacks and fast forwards or zoom in on a provisional present.

¹⁴ See Cherie Miecham's article.

¹⁵ Llorona is a myth of a proud and beautiful woman abandoned by a Spanish colonizer after she birthed two babies, whom she drowned to avenge him. She is known to be roaming along water bodies lamenting the death of her babies while also devouring any child whom she saw.

¹⁶ Becoming white is a concept that Rosi Braidotti borrows from Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of becoming, to refer to it as problematic as it is white male, logocentric, Christian, heterosexual and rational.

¹⁷ Foucault's *Power and Knowledge* as well as *History of Sexuality* are useful readings to understand this concept of power.

¹⁸ For understanding this, see Deleuze's movement images and time images. He argues that the camera moves can make objective reality by long, middle or close shots. It can use mirrors to produce virtual images of a real one so that virtuality swallows up the real. It can also deep focus an image to distinguish between past and present in space. He borrows from Bergson's criticism of clock time to think lived time. Past and future penetrate in present as memory and desire.

¹⁹ For more on this, see Walter Mignolo who says that alphabetic writing is linked with the exercise of power and in the Latin American context, to colonization.

²⁰ Becoming nomad alludes to a non-unitary yet politically engaged and ethically accountable vision of the nomadic subject. It is about a matter or relationship to a space and a situation they encounter and embrace. Braidotti critiques the humanist ideal of "Man" as the allegedly universal measure of all things, hence the post-human. Further she also critiques the species hierarchy and the human exceptionalism as post-anthropocentrism. The implications are that one may consider the Anthropocene as a multi-layered posthuman predicament that includes the environmental, socio-economic, and affective and psychic dimensions of our ecologies of belonging (Braidotti 2018).

²¹ In her article, "Oedipus Interruptus," Teresa de Lauretis explains the ways in which viewers identity with the film. She looks at female spectatorship in particular to show how they are "seduced" into femininity or submissive roles through the manipulations of the cinematic apparatus. This is Braidotti's Oedipal plot.

²² Nomadic ethics is about a sustained taking of stand against relativism and nihilism, against a multiplicity of different political waves, joining issue with emancipatory politics begging ethical accountability. For more on this, see Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*.

²³ To understand the meaning of these cinematic procedures, see Donato Totaro's highlighting that the "cinematographical apparatus" was an analogy for how the intellect approaches reality.

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The Forbidden Gaze: Orphic Visuality and Loss in Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*

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Abstract

Ancient myths are relevant to postmodern texts, as illustrated by Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* (1994). This paper examines the Canadian work as an example of Orphic visuality, singling it out from the numerous films that have rewritten two of the salient points addressed by the myth of Orpheus: traumatic loss and healing processes. The present hypothesis is that Egoyan develops further the cinematic possibilities of the tragic *fatum* of the poet-singer found in literary works and previous films, in particular Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Starting from the premise that both film *auteurs* appreciate the significant role of gazing in the standard mythical account, consideration is given to the use of this theme as an ontological and epistemological symptom of their respective age traumas. Attention is also drawn here to the metafictional meaning of visuality as a means of human representation, which explains why this specific aspect of the myth is recurrently articulated in cinema.

Keywords: Orpheus, *Exotica*, Loss, Image, Egoyan, Hitchcock.

1. Introduction

The dialectical truth behind "everything is the same yet different" leads us to reconsider the nihilistic "*Nihil novum sub sole*" (*Ecclesiastes*, 1: 10) in our perception of myths present in different contexts and media, twisting Adorno's view on the oxymoronic nature of artistic works: "An artwork is real only to the extent that, as an artwork, it is unreal, self-sufficient, and differentiated from the empirical world, of which it nevertheless remains a part" (1999 [1970], 279).

In this paper, the myth of Orpheus will exemplify the creative link between the classical world and contemporary Canadian fiction, as well as between literature and cinema, through the elements that the Canadian film *Exotica* (Egoyan 1994) shares with the tragic story of the Thracian musician, and, more importantly, through the different layers of significance that the myth inspires. The working hypothesis is that Egoyan, with this film, offers a postmodern example of intertextuality through a perverse rewriting of the ancient myth under the influence of one of his masters, Alfred Hitchcock. Our starting premise to study the mythical underpinnings of Egoyan's film is based on the cultural proximity classical Greece and postmodern Canada, both post-national realities comprised of essentially independent territories, share as civilized examples dealing with epistemological questions about identity in their culture.

In Northrop Frye's view, literature, which is not determined by external processes, offers a structure to mythical reality. "Literature," Frye argues, "is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of story-telling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought" (1965, 822). Working on this same mythical vision of art that suggests imaginative perspectives on the actual world, cinema has been often interpreted as visual mythology, "the art of film supremely lends itself to the transmittance of mythic themes" (Singer, 9). Transforming myths' anthropological and psychological contents into images has definitely shortened the long way that took cinema to finally be considered an art, taking into account that it carried on the role of a vehicle of culture-dealing with thought-provoking issues, as Christian Metz contends: "[Film] 'says' things that could also be conveyed in the language of words, yet it says them differently" (1974 [1968], 44). More specifically, cinema embodies our reality, reshaping it in the form of moving images and concrete sounds. This way, the seventh art tackles our experience of subjectivity, both as physical and as inner reality, which reinforces Cassirer's view of human beings' nature: "[...] instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*" (1944, 26).

Egoyan, whose films are described as texts to be "read rather than consumed" (Andrew, 24), confirms both his main subject and its complexity when he states, "There's nothing simple about representing a human being" (Pevere 1995a, 9). Obsessed with emotional realism, he resorts to human processes transforming them into images in order to show our metaphysical questioning. The mythical component reveals itself through the way his cinema displays possibilities to spectacularize significant motifs, such as the absurdity and unhealthiness of the modern world. The complex nature of his films has to do both with his own cinematic world in which his role as director is complemented by scriptwriting, producing, camerawork and editing, as well as with postmodern cultural approaches to existential chaos and their indecipherable spiritual vacuity, as his words prove: "I'm attracted to people who are lost in a world that I can navigate" (Egoyan 1993, 48).

The versatility of mythical accounts and the relevance of their mythemes make possible their cyclical recurrence. Besides, each new reinterpretation enriches the original text, adding different nuances to represent new contexts. The classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, mainly known through Virgil's book four of his *Georgics* (1988) and Ovid's book ten of his *Metamorphoses* (1955), is one of the most productively recycled stories. This is probably due to the way Eros and Thanatos are closely linked in it, even if their connection can be interpreted differently. According to Charles Segal, varying interpretations are fostered by the myth's triangular basis: "The meaning of the myth shifts as different points form the base: love-death, love-art, art-death" (1989, 2). The polysemic nature of the narrative about one of the strangest Greek heroes seems to have interested Egoyan and influenced his first commercially successful film, *Exotica*. Surprisingly enough, a \$2 million budget film managed to gross \$5.13 million in North America (Wilson 2009, xi) and it won the critics' prize in Cannes in 1994, together with eight Genies Awards from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television.

To what extent Egoyan's new acquired status is connected to the classical world cannot be affirmed, but what is possible to say is that the mythical resonance of the hero's magic musical abilities and his passionate romantic engagement (an attitude that triggers both his success and his ruin) contributed to the quality of the film. Inasmuch

as the film verges on the indecipherable, its content was similarly subject to a double reading: together with its existentialist underpinnings, it was commercialized as erotic, and obtained a nomination for an Adult Video Award for best Alternative Video. In that sense, Virgil and Egoyan embrace the two extremes of Greek world, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, a reference to classical world that was acknowledged by the director himself when talked about his characters' emotional world, "They're able to articulate their pain at some point, and for that reason seem to be more classically identifiable" (Pevere 1995b, 43).

Definitely, this fact contributed to the successful reception of this personal film, whose origins relate to the author's cultural and biographical background. Culturally, the director admitted the importance of his experience as reader and spectator at the time of *Exotica's* release: "The things that I've been drawing on for the past 10 years are basically the literature and theatre and film I saw in my late adolescence and early twenties" (Pevere 1995a, 67). When commenting on his sources of inspiration, he also made himself clear about his approach: "[M]y motivations are quite classical in terms of what I want to reveal about the characters, my desire to find a catharsis or some sense of resolution" (Gruben, 271); which should be added to other forms of cultural cross-fertilization like the literary tradition of the absurd, with Beckett's *œuvre* as a good example. Apart from it, there is always, according to the director, a visual stimulus that inspires each of his films and, in this case, it was the emotional impact caused by a picture of the body of a woman who had been arrested at the border when she was smuggling some eggs; what shocked him was mainly the contrasting effect of the maternal body incubating the eggs and a male body arresting her. Finally, as it will be shown further on, the film also draws from the director's autobiographical traumatic experience with the film's main topic, loss of love and subsequent healing.

2. Myth and Cinema

Being a well-known "compulsive movie-goer" (Pevere 2005a, 16), Egoyan filters his cinematic obsession in a very creative way. While he is probably not fully conscious about it, he takes, however, some inspiration from films he has watched. Among the best-known recreations of the classical myth of Orpheus, Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Marcel Camus' *Orfeu negro* (1959) or David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Exotica* is most influenced by the English-American director's approach — though it also shows some interest for Cocteau and Lynch. In relation to Hitchcock's influence, it needs to be noted firstly that Egoyan directed an episode of the American program "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" (1987) entitled "The Final Twist" when he was in his mid-twenties. Yet, the influence of this director goes beyond that show. *Exotica* can be defined as Hitchcockian both in its content and form.

Hitchcock's revisiting of the myth through his vague adaptation of the French novel *D'entre les morts* by Boileau-Narcejac (1954) will be here demonstrated to be the main cinematic reference for Egoyan's rewriting of the myth. Indeed, both filmmakers rework the classical story but create a much more psychologically complex version. This works to instill a cinematically powerful style, which enabled Hitchcock to do what he described as his main interest in this film; that is to say, to visualize "the hero's attempt to re-create the image of a dead woman through another one who's alive" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 243). The common world that Hitchcock and Egoyan share is based on the

complexity of the hero's quest to save the woman he loves as a way to save himself, on the necrophiliac fascination for women and, most importantly, on the traumatic healing process ensuing loss. Both *auteurs* offer the visual perception of these aspects through the artificiality of film language, obviously, the best way to deal with the role of visuality in the Orphic myth.

Trapped and haunted by their pasts, the modern Orpheuses, Scottie and Francis, embody most of the fascination the Thracian poet arose. The nature of their self-accusatory action, looking back, and their desperate attempt at recreating the past are indicative of the existence of a guilty feeling. It is a crime (murder in Hitchcock's case and pedophilia in Egoyan's) that brings life back through a fictionalized experience (necrophilia), whose ultimate purpose is to relive the traumatic past in order to be able to survive. In this sense, both filmmakers emphasize the mental sickness from which their characters suffer as a representation of their respective time periods.

Moreover, Hitchcock and Egoyan both use a double female character to represent Eurydice's role. The Victorian *doppelgänger*, based on the physical quality of the folkloric double apparitions, serves as a modern reference to their schizophrenic psychologization. In Hitchcock's film, Madeleine/Judie pay tribute to the "erotic thriller" genre convention of the *femme fatale* and, in Egoyan's case, Lisa/Christina are victimized as objects men use to satisfy themselves. The fact that none of them is depicted as a real woman, or even as a fully developed character, makes it easier for us to understand the necrophiliac atmosphere in the two modern stories. On the basis of this rationale, the two directors present these women as ideal images and works of art to be admired by men rather than touched, which explains Egoyan's insistence on the "*noli me tangere*" topos.

Furthermore, such an approach relates to men's problems in dealing with reality and their need to create artificial substitutes in order to feel at ease. The classic account of the myth of Orpheus already contains men's obsession with gaining control over the Other, rather than over themselves. Interestingly, what in the case of the Greek hero has a positive connotation and includes the power to dominate nature and gods in his search for himself, turns out to have a negative implication in the films in terms of the main characters' social irresponsibility. The explanation for that difference between the classical and the modern texts can probably be explained by the critical moments that hegemonic masculinity in the 50s and at the end of the 20th century went through, as stated by Roger Horrocks, "The second half of the century has seen an increasing destitution and dereliction in the male image" (1995, 171). Individuals, under pressure to be real men, panicked in their approach to women's bodies, and, as a consequence, the more pain men felt, the less real they wanted women to be, an evident fact that explains partially irrational behavior, "Men's sexual violence and harassment of women are in part grounded in a psychically corrupt pain that enables men to see themselves as victimized by women's attractiveness" (Beneke, 173).

Hitchcock's and Egoyan's approaches share two more relevant elements. First, an erotic subtext aimed at showing our psychological world and its interaction with social life. In particular, this subtext reveals how sexuality is connected to death, which is seen as both attractive and frightening in its association with the Romantic delusion of sexuality close to necrophiliac infatuation. Closely connected, the second element involves the cinematic obsessive exploration of gazing due to its key role in the myth of Orpheus. The forbidden glance, with the disappearing image of Eurydice, is one of its most mysterious mythemes, to the extent that it has produced an industrial amount of

critical guessing as to the reason why Orpheus disobeys and turns back. Looking back against the gods' injunction could be seen from two different perspectives depending on the way the classical relationship between gods and humans is interpreted. First, in the case gods are trying to help Orpheus, the decision not to look back would be his salvation—both as a way of recovering his love and as a metaphorical way of recovering from his loss since dwelling in the past means missing what was lost and constantly remembering what no longer exists. The second perspective, which assumes Gods' will to set an example for humans and to keep them at a distance, seems more plausible. Humans' power to capture reality through visual skills is contrasted to its deadly implication in the mythical account when gods tease Orpheus with their warning. On the one hand, they know it is improbable that a human being will believe in what they cannot see, all the more so when it is the object of their love. On the other hand, the Gods want to test Orpheus' obedience and make clear their power. Their perverse plan works, and the hero's transgressive gesture proves his human imperfection as the result of human curiosity, accident, impatience or cowardice; or even as an example of *hybris* that leads to this foolish act of overconfidence and arrogance. Regardless of the chosen perspective, the fact is that Orpheus' responsibility and guilt cannot be avoided, and it is his gaze that causes Eurydice to die a second time.

From our contemporary perspective, the violence of his outrageous gaze can also be interpreted as part of the paradoxical male behavior of desiring and destroying women. Given that the cultural value of the gaze ranges from physical identification to philosophical and emotional meanings, it is not difficult to understand the perversion of the scopophilic instinct in films, a point highlighted by Laura Mulvey in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Her main objective was to demonstrate "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (6) and some of its contradictions through examples that include Hitchcock's masterpieces. After insisting on how central the gaze is to the message, she concludes as follows: "*Vertigo* focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated in the hero" (17).

The power of scopophilia emerges when consideration is given to the connections between Hitchcock's work and *Exotica*. What is more, the dominance of the male gaze in cinema is probably the background for Egoyan's decision to name Francis' disappeared daughter Lisa, the same name as that of the main character in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954). On the basis of the common female name, it is possible to draw a parallel between the two male characters' behavior. Jeff, Lisa's boyfriend in Hitchcock's film, shifts from an unfriendly asexual relationship—closer to what could be described as familial when she is in his apartment—to the sexual interest he feels when observing her through his camera lens outside the apartment. In the Canadian film, Francis, Lisa's father, reacts similarly: after being traumatically separated from his daughter, he pays every night to see her unnatural replacement, a striptease dancer who happens to have been Lisa's babysitter; that is, he turns his mourning for his daughter into a fetishistic relationship, dangerously identifying both women. The Orphic gaze, based on the male fantasy of looking at a female image, supports the phallic discourse. Specifically, Orpheus' relationship to Eurydice illustrates what Gary R. Brooks calls "Centerfold Syndrome" (1995, 2) as a combination of voyeurism, objectification, the need for validation, trophism, and the fear of true intimacy, which unfortunately still constitutes the saddest reality of most love stories in patriarchy.

3. Egoyan's Orpheus

In addition to using Hitchcock as a source of inspiration, Egoyan is able to adapt the motifs of the myth of Orpheus to his own cinematic world and to work from his own palette. The film, indeed, includes the elements he has admitted that attract him as a filmmaker: "Complexity. Conflicting agendas. Different people trying to present a version of reality. A hidden history. How people cope with trauma. The need to create and construct personas" (Riley, 2005). The film, thus, fits perfectly in his singular and experimental world, his "Un-American weirdness" whose thematic and formal consistency has given him his own space. Jonathan Romney goes as far as to say that Egoyan has "practically created his own genre" (1995, 8). Egoyanesque postmodern existentialism, as his cinematic space could be named, has its core in the search for identity, home and the process of healing, a cultural reality that Catherine Russell figured as "a complex structure of memory, family, and representation" (2002, 323).

Exotica, which is Egoyan's sixth feature film, is immersed in what Romney defined as "self-enclosed erotic microclimate" (2003, 110). More specifically, it is rooted in plays about male violence, including *After Grad with Dad* (1980) and *Convention* (1982), which Egoyan wrote and directed when he was in his early twenties. Thematically, the film revolves around the traumatic experience of incest and the scars as part of any human being's attempt to survive himself/herself. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the film belongs to the Family Romances—the Freudian phrase that describes the dynamics of obsessive memory and loss. Together with *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) and *Felicia's Journey* (1999), this trilogy examines a controversial topic: the corrupted relationship between adults' experience and children's innocence. Egoyan even suggests some incestuous reality and fantasy about parental attention crossing the boundary into child abuse and murder, helping us to identify the author's doubts about the first social institution: "I'm suspicious of [the family's] structure" (Pevere 1995a, 26). It needs to be noted here that incest was acknowledged as a personal concern. When promoting the last part of the trilogy, Egoyan admitted that in his late teens he had been involved with a girl who was suffering from an abusive betrayal by her father, though he only found out about it later. Learning about this episode made him feel a traumatic mixture of desire and frustration, as can be inferred from his own words:

[S]omebody who is abused makes a parody of their own sexual identity as a means of trying to convince themselves that that part of themselves which has been destroyed is somehow not as vital as it is. Somehow they have to reduce it to something more grotesque than it can be, otherwise it becomes too painful to deal with. (Pevere 1995b, 48)

Leaving aside his feeling of guilt for not having done anything and thereby for having participated in an example of Sartrean denial, he gained insight into the world of sexuality and understood too late his loneliness in those days: "I came to understand how the sexual act is something quite separate from a means of sexual expression" (Pevere 1995b, 49).

Logically, works of art conceived at an early stage of an artist contain autobiographical undertones. Egoyan goes as far as to describe his characters as his alter-ego creations: "[F]ragments or aspects of my own personality. They were people looking for their own identity through rituals or gestures. But they were just shells" (Johnson, 2015). However, in this case, the sick need Francis feels to go to the *Exotica* club to – somehow – protect

Christina and thus reconnect with his happy past life is mainly Egoyan's cinematic way of denouncing the power difference in social status of men and women and the way female oppression is naturally explained, which can be related to Eurydice's unbalanced link to Orpheus. Francis' pathological desire embodies one of Egoyan's motifs: his skeptical opinion of institutionalized discourse. *Exotica* exemplifies the filmmaker's approach to family as social institution in the same way that *Calendar* (1993) questions national roots: "All that's meant to protect us is bound to fall apart. Bound to become contrived, useless and absurd. All that's meant to protect is bound to isolate. And all that's meant to isolate is bound to hurt" (Egoyan 1993).

Parents and husbands are supposed to protect "their" women. Contradictorily enough, in Orpheus' case, the hero fails to protect his wife, and so does Francis with Lisa and Christina. As argued, there is no clear reason why these two men do not help the women close to them, and by doing so also help themselves. Although the underworld they enter and inhabit for the rest of their lives cannot offer an explanation for the course of action they take, it emphasizes the mytheme of breaking the law and losing the woman they are in love with. Even if both stories have this narrative element in common, the way Egoyan tells it is contrary to the classical order and true to Paul Virilio's description of the Canadian's cinematic techniques, "You film in 'reverse gear'" (106). *Exotica* concludes with a coda where we see the very beginning of the story, which is not aimed at explaining what the spectator has seen but rather at making the audience ask the same question as in Orpheus myth, why does not the man help the woman and why does he let her disappear?

It is this five-minute flashback that contains the film's clearest Orphic allusion. It shows how after a moment of home happiness, Francis drives his daughter's babysitter, a very young Christina, back to her place. Outside her house, seeing her sad reaction when asked about the way her father talks about her, he reassures her in these terms: "Listen, Christina, if there is ever anything you want to talk about, about what might be going on at home, or whatever, you know that I'm here, okay?" (Egoyan 1994). With no further word spoken she gets out of the car and, while walking slowly the long pathway to her house, she turns back and looks at him. The meaning underlying this scene, added to the possible fantasy of an incestuous relationship between Francis and Lisa, dramatizes the complex relationship between adults and children, hinting at something that has been interpreted in a variety of ways in Christina's case. Romney reads it as an "unspecified damage" (1995, 7), whereas Wilson infers that "Christina is a character who has been abused within a family context" (2003, 32); and Masterson, for his part, sees clearly, "she is being sexually abused by her father" (2002, 887). Whatever Egoyan wants us to infer, what cannot be denied is the way this scene highlights the importance of gazing when Christina unsuccessfully seeks Francis' help. However, he does not react and she crosses the threshold of the postmodern representation of classical hell, her middleclass house, accompanied just by the gloomy music as she enters that labyrinth to disappear from our view.

The disturbing depth of this primal scene is depicted through the forbidding nature of the dream-like house in whose interior everything is hidden. Our contemporary hell, where we are condemned to live, is identified with our place and our family, reminding us about the central message of the film: "The things you want are the things that slip away" (Egoyan 1994). This idea takes us back to Orpheus' tragedy: in particular, to the loss of happiness, the search for some therapy, and the condemnation to live in a state between life and death.

Egoyan does not use brutality or any violent image. On the contrary, he portrays incest almost as hopeless *fatum*, where human intervention is reduced to nothing. The nightmarish atmosphere of the daylight delirium of the film's last five minutes redeems neither Francis nor Christina, in spite of reversing the gender roles from the classical story. Here starts their healing process to survive their past using erotic fantasies as a shield and soothing their pain with voyeuristic practices as a placebo. Francis asks Christina in *Exotica*, the club, "How could anybody want to hurt you?" (Egoyan 1994), playing out the protective father role he failed to be.

Unable to face reality, which he summarizes as "a jungle out there" (Egoyan 1994), and his mental pain, which he never verbalizes, Francis enacts his own fantasy, relegating the present to a state of inexistence by ritualistically meeting Christina every night at *Exotica* to mourn their shared loss. What Freud termed "faulty mourning" refers here to their personal project to come to terms with traumatic experiences without resorting to professional help. Indeed, the male protagonist seems to believe that healing will occur by repeating the same patterns of behaviour. Gazing at a semi-naked Christina for \$5 and being able to talk to her in order to make her feel safe is the pseudo-therapeutic fetishistic cure Francis uses to avoid paralysis. Experiencing some connection with life without abandoning the dead territory implies the sort of imposture those who need a fully controlled getaway go for. However, this method can lead to an addiction where loss is exaggerated, and so we end up creating our own reality to substitute the real world, out of fear of facing who we really are. The postmodern sarcasm in Egoyan's film shows itself in the way in which Francis' scopoc obsessive behaviour is not a cure for him since it ultimately increases his suffering but, paradoxically, it is closely connected to the cinematic nature since turning reality into a picture is actually what cinema does. Whereas the repetition of the healing action proves to be a short-lasting fantasy, recorded images turn out to be the only possibility of true memories, blurring the difference between reality and fantasy. The ghostly result is the best representation that Egoyan can create of our dysfunctional world and our fragility, the dark part of the message customers in the club can get when Eric, introducing the girl, says, "[She] can show you the mysteries of her world" (Egoyan 1994).

4. The Epistemological Gaze

The narrative puzzle concludes when the therapy is proven wrong. As a matter of fact, the hopeful scene in which Francis and Eric hug one another shows the human touch that breaks the club's rule of "*noli me tangere*." Egoyan emphasizes the importance of a transcendental method to deal with traumas; something which has commonalities with Orpheus' final stages and the transformation of his loss into a religious experience, the so-called Orphic mysteries. However, intertextuality is not limited to this scene, since what both the myth and the film share is mainly their metafictional value. It was the critic and novelist Maurice Blanchot, in his central theoretical essay "The Gaze of Orpheus" (1982 [1955]), who used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to work on the paradoxical nature of literary art and analyzed the analogies between the gaze and artistic writing and story-telling processes: "Writing begins with Orpheus's gaze" (Blanchot, 175). Through his music, the mythical hero compensates his love's loss in its configuration of invisibility, but identifying himself with his art, "He is Orpheus only in the song" (171), as well as his power, "only in the song does Orpheus have power over Eurydice" (172); both characters lose themselves in the song.

Blanchot's interpretation of Orpheus' link between inspiration and desire and his insistence on gaze as the essential moment of freedom take us back to Egoyan, whose connection with Hitchcock becomes, from this theoretical stance, even more noticeable. According to the French theorist's interpretation of the myth, both filmmakers are to be considered Orphic authors because of the way they love the form of film itself, that which Hitchcock called "pure cinema" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 283). His emphasis is on the construction of the story and on the way it is told, rather than on the story itself, which, in *Vertigo's* case, he summarized in a sentence: "the man wants to go to bed with a woman who's dead; he's indulging in a form of necrophilia" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 244). He knew that it is the form, what is specific to each artistic expression, that creates the content. In other words, the major element that Egoyan learned from Hitchcock's films is the development of the structure and the visual narrative to achieve emotions in a way that only cinema is able to do. In this case, it is the artistic choices that are able to make us enjoy the films—at least from the cinematic point of view—and are considered responsible for the place both films have among the best examples of their authors' respective *œuvres*, to the extent that, besides *Exotica's* status, *Vertigo* is usually, together with *Citizen Kane*, rated as one of the best two films ever made.

In Hitchcock's filmography, visual formalism represents his cinematic project, "I also explained that the story was of less importance to me than the overall visual impact on the screen" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 247-8); *Vertigo* is then one hundred percent Orphic because it contributes to making insanity evident, in its etymological sense. As regards *Exotica*, its author, together with his artistic teams and artists, including his cinematographer, Paul Sarossy, and his musician, Mychael Danna, proves that his narrative conventions go one step beyond Hitchcock's use of structure, dialogues and acting. In contrast to the cause-and-effect logic of Hollywood narration, Egoyan's purpose is to introduce the spectator to an insane chaotic atmosphere where different layers are juxtaposed. He presents the process the same way characters cope with what they have not yet come to terms with, letting the audience similarly go through it. This way, he breaks the chronological structure. By rejecting the predictability of a linear narrative, he represents the film's obsession, which Egoyan himself has summarized in these words: "In telling the story of *Exotica*, I wanted to structure the film like a striptease" (Beard 2007, 113). His words may refer not only to the gradual way in which the movie reveals itself but also to the honesty it shows to reach the darkest part of ourselves. Egoyan's deconstruction of the story insists on what one of the two contrasting protagonists, Eric, verbalizes: "I just need to find a structure" (Egoyan 1994). Experimenting with narrative devices, like making the audience go back to the initial stage at the very end of the film, denies the spectator any sort of comfortable position or superiority and provokes our shocked reaction. Withholding information—or giving it through flashbacks that sometimes are not even offered as the characters' past moments, using a mostly incoherent psychological point of view or refusing to use dialogues in any clear informative way, all underline the director's intention to cause the strong catharsis the tragedy asks for and to communicate the inexpressible message.

The outrageous nature of the myth is then emphasized through the combination of a classical approach towards dramatic characters, in terms of their identities and their goals, and the use of untraditional techniques, which, as pointed out by Egoyan himself, result in a film in which "the means by which [...] things happen is unorthodox" (Gruben, 271). In an interview with Peter Harcourt, Egoyan expounded further on his cinematic interests, revealing the artistic creed by which he assessed film viewing:

The most resonant moments for me as a viewer always come when I don't quite know what it is I'm watching. I'm lost in a wash of emotions and feelings that do not originate from something that I can identify immediately. They're the most exhilarating passages in cinema because they come so close to the dream state. (Cited in Wilson 2009, 13)

Given Egoyan's preference for unpredictable, multi-layered and misleading films, it seems reasonable to understand that clear or objective information is not his main objective. Therefore, the way his films should be watched is, in fact, similar to the quality he admires in Hitchcock's rereading of the myth of Orpheus, which he praised in these terms:

[H]e seems able to use the instrument in a purely emotional way. He was so good at those technical tricks—but the thing that makes *Vertigo* so moving is that it transcends all that. It operates at the level of a fever dream. It really feels to be his most personal work. (Said, 2003)

That is to say, the Canadian director considers that the cinematic key element is the transcendental power of technicalities. It is Egoyan's strong opposition to logical thinking that enables us to define his films as lyrical, rather than narrative, texts. In his work, causality is thus substituted by the poetic approach to difficult questions; hence, it is safer to follow the classical *sententia*, "*Melius sentire quam scire*." In *Exotica*'s case what cannot be rationally comprehended moves us deeply. The relevance of such an emotional territory is that its irrational undertones coincide with the *topos* created by Orpheus's decision to go beyond death to search for Eurydice and to cause her definite death by disobeying. This way both the classical and the Canadian stories, as well as Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, get closer to their audiences, who may react to Eurydice's physical death with surprise and will certainly be shocked by her second eternal death.

Emotional logic is at the root of cathartic empathy and, in consequence, enables the understanding of feelings, which can mainly be justified subjectively. The psychological connection with the audience is triggered by the irrational quality of the myth, whose archetypal basis is the collective unconscious that connects this world and the underworld. The epistemological side of emotional discourse explains Orpheus' journey between life and death, thereby appealing to the sacred in our existence. Suffering associated with the process of understanding oneself moves the audience to empathize with the irrational yet human desire to go beyond our limits.

This way, the myth of Orpheus makes sense in any of its reappropriations; i.e. classical, modern or postmodern. Certainly, all three texts highlight the psychological undertones of the myth, helping us recognize our irrational side that Egoyan has emphasized, "[p]eople tend to discuss my films in terms of theory, but I'm not a theorist—my stories are told to communicate emotions" (Mckenna, 1995). The Canadian director, in fact, turns the myth's emotional truth into the universal language of cinema. Highlighted by the hidden meaning of title, *Exotica*'s visual metaphor explains our pathological state of alienation, which is considered by its creator the film's leitmotiv: "[W]hat really drives the film is the exoticism that we feel towards our own experience, that point at which our own memory, and our own relationship to the things that are closest to us become exotic" (Shambu, 2001).

In agreement with another postmodernist Canadian, Marshall McLuhan, whose book *The Medium Is the Message* (1964) theorizes on the medium as an extension of ourselves, Egoyan and Hitchcock found their place in the movies. Accordingly, their work is always

a metacinematic one. When Romney insists that Egoyan shows “the frames as well as the picture” (1999, 6), he is pointing at what the Canadian director has in common with Hitchcock: both filmmakers work on the best filmic possibilities to create a supreme form of expression. Egoyan admired Hitchcock’s self-consciousness, and he himself admitted his own preference for artificiality: “I’ve always wanted to resist films which have the ability to make people think that what they are seeing is real” (Gruben, 271). From the very first scene, *Exotica* makes clear its scopic nature by focusing on the problems of gazing: “You have to convince yourself that this person has something hidden that you have to find” (Egoyan 1994). The rest of the film revolves around this theme, with images seeking to represent what we do not want to lose. For Egoyan cinema is always about loss; in his words, “I find cinema is a great medium to explore ideas of loss, because of the nature of how an image affects us and how we relate to our own memory and especially how memory has changed with the advent of motion pictures with their ability to record experience” (Porton 1997, 39-41).

As a consequence, visual recorded material has changed our stereotypical approach to the concept of surface. It no longer means superficial knowledge; quite the opposite, it is identified with the photographic frame and the value of video imagery representing our psychological territory; that is, “the concept of surface proves to be the most complex and intriguing aspect of any rendering of personality” (Egoyan 1993, 25). The complexity of the content together with the almost self-contained nature of the image, which displays sensory and mental realities, results in its distance from its creator, as Egoyan is happy to admit: “The films that really excite me are those in which it is unclear if the filmmaker is really aware of how disturbing or moving the image is” (1993, 52). In any case, the artificiality of cinematic language based on mechanical devices that have a psychological component is no different from human nature as discursive concept in postmodern theory where nature has become unnatural.

Hitchcock’s and Egoyan’s metacinematic obsession in *Vertigo* and *Exotica* relies on the metafictional content in the myth of Orpheus because, as Metka Zupancic states, in Orphism “language becomes the ultimate, in other words, the absolute” (2017, 54). In her analysis of the influence of this myth in the French *Nouveau Roman*, Zupancic uses Elizabeth Sewell’s *The Orphic Voice* (1960) to emphasize what the story represents: “In the Orpheus story, myth is looking at itself. This is the reflection of myth in its own mirror” (Sewell 1960, 41). If consideration is given to the systematic way in which Orphism creates “a textual and intertextual web” (Zupancic, 62), it seems reasonable to connect the metapoetical element that Sewell emphasizes, “[f]or Orpheus is poetry thinking about itself” (47), with the metacinematic obsession that characterizes both Hitchcock’s and Egoyan’s work. As a matter of fact, their two thrillers explore the consequences of looking, loving and losing in a way clearly connected to Ihab Hassan’s idea of Orpheus’ guilt, “The crime of Orpheus corresponds to the form of his atonement. Whatever that sin may be, language and form, expressions of emergent consciousness, are complicit in it” (1982, 5).

5. Conclusion

As concluding remarks, film language offers unexplored possibilities for the analysis of the human nature component expressed in myths. Cinema, on the one hand, is marvelously able to express our thoughts and emotions in a visual way, showing the

way our subconsciousness works. In Egoyan, for example, images trigger a myriad of possibilities, sometimes even making visible the invisible: "[T]o me, the highest aim of any film is to enter so completely into the subconscious of the viewer that there are moments and scenes and gestures which can be generated by the spectator's imagination. That becomes part of the film they're playing in their mind" (Pevere 1995a, 50). On the other hand, his films work on the artistic principles of cinema as an expressive medium that include Griffith's grammar or Eisenstein's montage, as well as Welles' modernist revolution or Hitchcock's psychological *mise-en-scène*. In the Canadian's case, according to Emma Wilson, he has been able to create new ways to cause the audience's catharsis, "through his manipulation of video and other technologies within film, Egoyan finds modes of representation that bring the viewer up close to the emotions of his protagonists" (2006, 25-26).

The importance of *Exotica's* emotional realism may be described as an instance of the perfect synthesis of cinematic devices and human feelings and conflicts. What is more, Egoyan's postmodernist approach rules out the possibility of distinguishing between reality and recorded images in his films, playing with "video-memories," as emotionally experienced recorded material in order to remind the character who he is, like in Francis' case. In fact, Egoyan is, in Romney's words, the "most alluringly postmodern" (2003, back cover). His intense self-consciousness and the complexity of his works make him deserve such distinction. For him there is no simple truth, probably because of his desire to turn the camera into a character, a missing person or a modern version of the voice of the gods in the Greek chorus, or even of the filmmaker.

His skepticism and epistemological questioning do not allow the spectator to take anything for granted or to relax comfortably feeling at home. Moreover, the process of self-examination scrutinizes most of what society considers normalcy: the world of alienation, major social institutions like the institution of family as well as many other social realities like home or even the realm of fantasy, including sexuality. Most of these aspects are analyzed from a postmodern point of view that does not attempt at separating cultural affairs from an economy- and technology-driven post-industrial society. It is the merging of discourses that causes every action in the film to have a price and be seen as part of the marketplace the world has been transformed into, to the point that *Exotica* was defined by bell hooks, as "the quintessential postmodern film" (2009 [1996], 36).

It should therefore come as little surprise that the new Orpheus is an accountant ready to pay \$5 to enjoy the company of a sex worker and abuse survivor. This new Eurydice makes him feel the way he likes, while he has paid for (another) baby-sitter who, while playing the piano at his home, looks after the memory of a dead girl. The role played by music—the highest form of art in classical world—in the myth presents Orpheus as the epitome of his culture and his skill enabled him to lure his way in the underworld in order to be with Eurydice. All this power is substituted in Egoyan's film by economy, which offers Francis the same possibilities. Once the ancient role of music is reduced and pagan gods are no longer needed to remind us who we are, such a psychological and social function is carried out by technological devices in *Exotica*; more specifically, the already mentioned video-memories, which, as Jonathan Romney explains, have a "status as a prosthesis for human memory" (2003, 111). The parallelism between gods and video goes so far as they both present a world where our inner experiences are exoticized, to the point that they are as distant from us as gods were on the Olympus.

Leaving aside the modifications to the myth made by Egoyan as a result of the fact that the text is used in a different context, the most important commonality needs to be highlighted. His diasporic film, a nomadic text that bell hooks identified with "the world of border crossing" (28), explores a territory that cannot be limited by temporal or geographical templates. The existential issues such as identity, happiness, the traumatic links between desire and loss, or intimacy that the myth of Orpheus presented inspired Atom Egoyan, probably through Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. However, he was able to make the story of Orpheus his own text, coming up with "a film that is utterly Egoyan's" (Pevere 1995a, 34); that is to say, full of his own concerns and his own hyperreal cinematic style. It is his critical approach to the contemporary world in his art-house film that reinvents the myth's metaphysical questioning; more specifically, the epistemological chaos as a consequence of the connection between Eros and Thanatos.

The magic of cinema as the supreme art form allows the complexity of the visual material of the myth to be developed. Working on images to reflect the importance of absence implies considering films as fully equipped cultural texts to give new life to human questions. The immutable relevance of Orpheus' example insists on Cocteau's interpretation of the myth as watching death at work. In an age dominated by images, enlarging the limits of phenomenal visibility complicates some of the issues the myth displayed. Cinema—a logical inheritor of myths' social role—helps us face some of our darkest truths. Furthermore, it is an appropriate means to try to offer artistic possibilities to the fears and horrors of our liquid and hybrid era by blurring, in Egoyan's case, the fragile line between reality and cinema and using images to keep track of our memories as a truth that fosters remembering. Some filmmakers reflect as artists on human identity rather than insisting as businessmen on the principle expressed in the movie's most famous line: "We're here to entertain, not to heal" (Egoyan 1994).

Myths, cinema and art in general have this therapeutical search for a purifying catharsis to cope with the tragic vision of general state of woundedness that Leonard Cohen sings in "Everybody Knows" (1988), the background music for Christina's act. Myths will fertilize our reality as long as their malleable but always relevant content is used to visualize the symptoms of our unhealthy age. This way *Exotica*, merging the particular and the universal, reaffirms the value of the classical "*omnia vincit amor*," a literary topic that cannot belong only to the ancient world since it still represents a utopian dream.

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Monstrous Heroes, Epic Monsters: A Contemporary Graphic Adaptation of *Beowulf*

MARÍA PORRAS SÁNCHEZ

Abstract

Beowulf by Santiago García and David Rubín stands out among the many graphic adaptations of the medieval heroic poem on account of its length, insight and art. Theirs is a cultural translation that adapts medieval to postmodern tropes. This article examines how their reading brings closer the character of the medieval hero with the contemporary superhero. It also explores how both creators subvert the tropes of the hero and the monster in terms of graphic treatment and storyline, whether approaching original themes under a new light—such as guilt—or hybridizing monstrous bodies and aligning them with humans.

Keywords: *Beowulf*, hero, superhero, monster, hybridity, abjection, graphic adaptation, cultural translation, monomyth, guilt.

1. Introduction

The hero and their countless representations, interpretations, revisitations and adaptations have been a constant presence in all cultures throughout history. Whether medieval recreations, fantasy warriors, or postmodern superheroes, heroes populate the contemporary screens in films, games and TV series releases. No doubt, they often bear little resemblance with the literary heroes of yore, but Herakles, Odysseus or king Arthur still attract the attention of contemporary creators. Each creator, especially if they belong to a different generation, is bound to read the classics under a new light, by adding or suppressing different layers of meaning to the original source. They read the classic and translate it to their own creative universe, taming it for their own purposes. This adaptation process is not free of tensions, but these might become a creative force that not only hails the worth of the original, but also founds a remarkable cultural product in its own right.

This article explores Santiago García and David Rubín's *Beowulf* (2013, 2018), a graphic adaptation of one of the most renowned heroic poems of the medieval times, written in the West-Saxon dialect presumably between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century. García and Rubín join the long list of creators who have approached and adapted the original poem to different media—novels, animation and real action films, comic books and videogames.

Santiago García based his script directly on Seamus Heaney's translation of the Old English poem (*Beowulf* 2000). In a way, Heaney's translation already adapts the original to his own cultural background by including many words of Irish origin, a Celtic language unrelated to Old English. For Heaney, this was an opportunity to avoid the cultural determinism that considered English and Irish antagonistic tongues (xxiv). In

turn, García adapted Heaney's text to his Spanish script, and together with David Rubín, they transferred that script to a different medium, the comic, turning it into a graphic novel. Recently, their work has been translated into English and was nominated to the 2018 Eisner Awards in the category of Best Adaptation from Another Medium. Through this journey of translations and adaptations, *Beowulf* becomes a cultural translation, a contemporary reading of the Germanic tradition speckled with Christian references of the original. Thus, the original's "mythic potency" (Heaney, xii) is adapted for a comic readership that is very familiar with monsters and heroes, more specifically their postmodern version, superheroes.

As this article shows, Rubín and García's taming of this literary beast, directly based on Heaney's version, articulates an interesting reading of the original. First, by highlighting a secondary theme of the poem—guilt—and turning it into the main conflict of the story and then blurring the boundaries between heroes and monsters through Rubín's graphic treatment of flesh. By doing so, García and Rubín alter the fixed duality of good versus evil addressed in most adaptations of the heroic poem, since heroes become slightly monstrous and monsters moderately human in their version.

To carry this double analysis, García and Rubín's *Beowulf* is examined through the general lens of adaptation studies, but using theoretical tools from two different fields: myth criticism to approach *Beowulf* as a hero, with his connection to the superhero in the graphic novel, and postcolonial theory to discuss the monsters' hybridity. This comparative perspective creates a double approach to the authors' reading of the story, highlighting the dimension added to the figure of the monster and to the myth of the hero, with a focus on the contemporary figure of the superhero.

2. Adapting / Appropriating / Translating *Beowulf*

Originally published in Spain in 2013, Santiago García and David Rubín's version of the heroic poem is a significant example of the many lives of a classic. In the last decades, *Beowulf* has been often approached as poem-to-film and poem-to-videogame adaptations. It has also been adapted and appropriated profusely in a comic format.¹ Following Julie Sanders' distinction, while adaptation "signals a relationship with an informing source text or original" (35), appropriation "frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (35). To the latter category correspond the versions that alternatively made *Beowulf* a Christian hero: Enrico Basari's Italian *Beowulf: Leggenda cristiana della antica Danimarca* (1940-1955)—a warrior fighting against monsters, dragons, vampires and even aliens; Michael Uslan and Ricardo Villamonte's *Beowulf, Dragon-Slayer* (1975)—an immortal being who helps the police with cases involving supernatural creatures; Brian Augustyn's *Beowulf* (2005-2006)—or a cyberpunk fighter in manga-style; and David Hutchison's *Beowulf* (2006).

The remaining comic versions are transcultural adaptations (Hutcheon, 145) that follow the plot of the poem to a greater or lesser extent: Jerry Bingham's *Beowulf* (1984), with a Conan look, or Francis Lombardi and Kevin Altieri's *A Different Shade of Gray* (2003), a short morality tale based on *Beowulf* and *Wiglaf*. Gareth Hinds' *Beowulf* (2002) is the only version in English language with a clear intention to adapt the content of the original poem to the visual format. However, all those versions are much shorter and technically less complex than Rubín and García's *Beowulf* and "far tamer, both in violence and creative exploration," according to reviews on the recent English translation of the Spanish comic published by Image Comics (Murel 2018).

Santiago García indicates that his first contact with *Beowulf* was through an illustrated version by Alice and Martin Provensen included in a volume on myths and legends for children (*Mitos y Leyendas* 1968). According to the author, the adaptation of the classic became an organic process because it was ingrained in his imagination in his early years. After approaching the poem through a graphic adaptation, years later he would read different comic adaptations, and finally, Heaney's translation.²

In any case, García's intention was not to transfer the heroic poem to the comic literally looking for a supposed objectivity, but to elaborate a new reading together with the illustrator, reinterpreting plot, characters and themes. At the same time, we can consider García and Rubín's *Beowulf* a cultural translation, a term used in social anthropology and defined by Talal Asad as a task, for an anthropologist, to transfer not only the literal meaning of a message and its historic context, but the cultural fact itself. Therefore, for Asad, "to translate culture the anthropologist must first read and then reinscribe the implicit meanings that lie beneath / within / beyond" (160). In this way, García and Rubín's cultural translation reactivates the medieval heroic poem through a transcultural adaptation that works at a linguistic, stylistic, thematic and visual level.

3. Heroes and Superheroes: A Cultural Translation of the Monomyth

In contemporary imagination, heroes are intrinsically associated with comics. Or, more specifically, with superheroes, their postmodern heirs, who have become almost indistinguishable in Postmodernism, after the cultural turn that has eroded the traditional limits becomes the so-called high culture and mass or pop culture (Jameson 1998). Different authors (Morrison 2011, Reynolds 1994) have pointed out that superheroes have created a contemporary mythology, a new cosmogony populated by its own gods, heroes and their nemeses, ruled by its own rules and recipient of a specific iconography.

Whether adaptations or appropriations, all poem-to-comic reinventions of *Beowulf* are examples of how the hero "has become part of the wider cultural consciousness" (Ndalianis, 1). In addition, they also show the potential for assimilation inherent to comic culture and how authors have found inspiration in different mythological sources. For instance, Grant Morrison acknowledges that, like many other comic artists, he aimed at "re-creating the superhero in terms of medieval quest allegories" (301). Jack "King" Kirby, the creator of many of the American superheroes in the 1940s, draws on Hebrew scriptures and epic mythology (Morrison, 38). Also, García has noted the connection between *The Iliad* and many of the "themes, motifs and narrative mechanisms of the Marvel universe" (2017).³ Umberto Eco compares superhero comics to myths in "The Myth of Superman" and Stan Lee used to compare his comics to the foundation of a modern mythology (Somigli, 293).

As mentioned above, García became fascinated with the Provensens' illustrated adaptation of *Beowulf* when he was a child, when he started to read superhero comics. In fact, he was impressed by their characterization of a hero, "because I found him very close to the profile of modern superheroes" (2017).⁴ This reception of the hero and his connection to the superhero illustrates how "different knowing audiences bring different information to their interpretations of adaptations" (Hutcheon, 125). In his script for *Beowulf*, García appropriates the mythical concept of the medieval hero. Medieval heroes are brave individuals "who risks life and limb to protect both their honor and that of their people" (Allen, 36). However, such heroic ethos is defined by the hero's ability to

live harmoniously with both the laws and norms of society (Napierkowski, 503). Although contemporary medievalism has assimilated attributes such as honor and bravery in its recreation of medieval heroes, it has frequently ignored this kingship ideal to which Napierkowski refers. García is not an exception, since he transfers heroic values such as loyalty and courage to his perception of the modern superhero, but avoids references to kingship and leadership instruction. In his assimilation of the modern superhero and the medieval hero, García added a conscious “action tone” at a graphic level throughout the comic. This is a similar tone of the superhero genre, formerly developed by Rubín in *The Hero* (2015), a contemporary rereading of The Twelve Labors of Heracles. This obviously implies numerous action scenes—frequently mute—, accelerated sequences, inset panels offering alternative perspectives and details, and onomatopoeias.

In terms of language and style, García's *Beowulf* is a meticulous adaptation of the language of the classic. In fact, he used as a source text Seamus Heaney's translation and certain passages are direct translations into Spanish. He also translated certain kennings, descriptive phrases which present a metaphoric association, like “camino de la ballena” (García and Rubín, 25), a translation of “whale-road” (Heaney, l.20) to refer to the sea.⁵ But he also introduced new ones, like “agua de la espada,” literally *water of the sword*, in allusion to blood, that did not appear on the original. Either way, García incorporates a literary device that resounds with the implicit meanings of the originals. Such faithfulness to the stylistic devices and language of the heroic poem was born out of García's fascination with the language of the Nordic sagas that he discovered through Jorge Luis Borges' essays;⁶ those kennings “bear such an excessive poetic charge that they transmit more than images, an epic, timeless feeling that turn the poem into a symbolic, and therefore, eternal representation, still valid for contemporary readers” (2017).⁷

García also maintains the same values attached to Germanic culture. *Beowulf* illustrates a heroic code of honor that Germanic society highly valued, characterized by honor, loyalty, courage and fearlessness. Those attributes still appeal to popular culture in the 21st century and they are closely associated with the figure of the superhero.

Many comic scholars have established a parallelism between the path of a traditional hero and a modern superhero (Miettien 2012, Garrett 2008, Lang and Trimble 1988). As established by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004 [1949]), there is a common mythological structure in the journey undertaken by any archetypal hero. The original *Beowulf* is no exception to the monomyth and the three stages of a hero's quest are very evident: “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (2004, 33). Regarding the first stage, Beowulf leaves Geatland and comes to the aid of the Scyldings; at the second stage, he defeats Grendel and his mother and then, at the last stage, returns to the Geats as king to meet his fate fifty years later, after slaying the dragon that threatens his people.

According to the theory of the monomyth, the hero's path is performative: the self is undone and redone by leaving the familiar behind and undergoing a series of adventures. For Campbell: “The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there is something lacking in the normal experience available or permitted to the members of society” (1991, 123). But the original Beowulf does not specify the reasons of his departure beyond the fact that the news of the problems “had reached me at home” (Heaney, l.411). Perhaps the anonymous poet did not need to

emphasize a certain code of solidarity and bravery that all his readers might know (Albertson, 2). Furthermore, the hero's return becomes a bitter experience with time: as an old king, he needs to defeat the last monster to protect his people, but, abandoned by his men in the final hour, both hero and dragon perish in the fight.

Although Rubín and García adapt their comic to the monomyth's cycle, their reading attempts to interpret what prompts the hero to start his journey and to justify the bitterness of the reintegration phase. García consciously adds a different interpretation to the original "call to epic" (2017), a new layer of meaning. He wants to dig into the character's personality and he hides in the pages of this graphic novel an implicit identity conflict: García's Beowulf comes to the rescue not for glory or solidarity, but because of guilt.⁸ In their comic, García and Rubín emphasize an episode that might pass unnoticed to the reader when approaching the poem for the first time: the story of Breca's death, Beowulf's childhood friend. Beowulf tells the story of their swimming contest and how his companion perished in the waves. García and Rubín incorporated this passage in their work with most of the details from the original and then decided to bring it back in the last pages, before the old hero meets the dragon and his final fate. "¿Queréis saber la verdadera historia de Breca?" [Do you want to know the true story about Breca?], he asks, while he munches on some cherries that bear a strong resemblance with torn flesh (142-143).

Furthermore, García and Rubín also bring forward guilt, a theme that was present in the original.⁹ At first sight, guilt seems at odds with the Germanic warrior code. As different scholars have pointed out (Clark 1998, Robinson 1985, Jones 1963), in cultural terms the poem belongs to a world in which honor is the reward for right conduct and shame the punishment for wrong deeds. According to Robinson, shame culture did not disappear with the conversion to Christianity, but guilt culture was superimposed to shame culture (Robinson, 119). The Christian poet might have used Beowulf's "unaccustomed anxiety and gloom" (Heaney, l. 2332) before facing the dragon "as evidence for the hero's sense of guilt, an anachronistic imposition of the poet's culture on the poem's heroic (and pagan) world" (Clark, 285).

While Clark points at the possibility that Beowulf's guilt derives from the threat the dragon presents to his honor after raiding his kingdom (285-286), García and Rubín fill in the blanks with an alternative explanation for his dark thoughts, by presenting a gloomy Beowulf in his final hour and introducing a second reference to the history of Breca, hinting at the role played by Beowulf in the episode. The episode also bears a thematic resemblance with superhero universes, in which guilt is ever-present: Batman, Spiderman, Superman and, specially, Captain America (Weiner, 90), are characters riddled with guilt that, at a certain point in their narrative arcs, suffer trauma over the loss of a sidekick, a friend or a family member, and blame themselves for their passive or active participation in that loss.

García and Rubín's reading of the poem casts a new light on the aging hero, who is no longer the selfless warrior, but an old man propelled by guilt after having an active part in the death of his friend, becoming a hero and a traitor at the same time. By including a new reference to Breca in the last part of the story, García and Rubín highlight how Beowulf's past has haunted his glory, suggesting that the hero is not perfect after all. The statement "los monstruos nunca se acaban" [monsters never disappear] (124), which opens the third section of the graphic novel and presents an old Beowulf on his throne, somberly looking down, depicted in cold tones, has then a double interpretation:

either the hero's task is never-ending and therefore he is bound to fail in protecting his people, or the monster lurks within the hero and guilt prevents him from savoring glory.

4. Hybrid Monsters and Abject Bodies

Anthony Burgess defined *Beowulf* through a very visual language: "A poem whose grim music is the snapping of fangs, the crunching of bones, and whose color is the grey of the northern winter, shot by the red of blood" (18). García and Rubín may as well have had this image in mind while working on their comic. David Rubín uses different shades of red on most of the pages, leaving whites and greys for landscapes and a greenish red for Grendel's underwater lair. Bodies and body parts, whether close-ups or wider frames, populate the pages. Wine and half eaten food strongly resemble blood and gore, while eating men remind us of Burgess' "snapping of fangs" (18). This crammed style and visceral images convey a claustrophobic, sinister atmosphere to the graphic novel that adapts the original tone and gloomy vocabulary.

The presence of the three monsters stands out in the graphic novel, but such monsters already occupied a prevalent position in the original, according to J.R.R. Tolkien: "[Southern mythology does not have] the monsters in the center — as they are in *Beowulf* to the astonishment of the critics. But such horrors cannot be left permanently unexplained, lurking on the outer edges" (29). Tolkien assumed that the anonymous poet had tried to exorcise the fear of monsters by invoking them and giving them prominence. García agrees with Tolkien and considers monsters as the most fascinating aspect of the classic, the differentiating factor that distinguishes *Beowulf* from epic poems like *Mio Cid* (García 2013). Although their presence is undeniable, the central aspect of these creatures is ambiguous. In the poem, they are peripheral subjects that lurk on the "phantasmal boundaries" (Heaney, xv) of civilized society. Appropriately, Grendel is described in the poem as a *mearcstapa*, or "border-stepper" (l. 103), a marauder that haunts the border of human spaces. The fact that inner spaces and outer spaces are visually differentiated in the comic is also "a meditation on our physical vulnerability to the environment (the frigid and unforgiving landscape is emphasized) and to inexplicable enemies" (Forni, 112).

Both the heroic poem and comic emphasize the fact that Grendel's hatred is the result of envy: "It harrowed him / to hear the din of the loud banquet / every day in the hall, the harp being struck / and the clear song of a skilled poet" (l.85-90). Thus, Grendel envies the fraternity, the merry coexistence of human beings at the mead hall, the center of civilization in Germanic societies. The existence of a center from which he is excluded is what makes him a marginal figure, the Other. A creature torn from a civilization that he covets and despises at the same time. A familiar Other all the same, since the monster is Cain's spawn, and therefore human in origin.

Medieval studies have recently turned their attention to postcolonial theory (Cohen 2000, Joy and Ramsey 2006, Kabir and Williams 2005), by suggesting its application to "any time or place where one social group dominates another" (Cohen, 3, cited in Warren). Histories of exploitation, social antagonism and differences based on religion, culture or ethnicity indeed plagued medieval societies. According to Cohen, the "hybrid, uncanny bodies" of medieval monsters, such as giants, "suggest that even if the period is alluringly strange, it is at the same time uncomfortably familiar" (5). Cohen explains that "in the medieval occidental imaginary, the category admixture that hybridity represents is almost always conjoined with monstrousness" (85). Therefore, the postcolonial notion

of hybridity aptly applies to monstrous bodies, familiar and yet strange, byproducts of contact zones between cultures.

The original *Beowulf* can be approached from a postcolonial perspective, with Grendel and Grendel's mother as hybrids forced to occupy the margins of civilized society, since "marginality unintentionally reifies centrality because it is the center that creates the condition of marginality" (Ashcroft et al., 154). García and Rubín's graphic novel emphasizes this approach to hybridity. While García admits that there is an identification between the hero and the monster at a political level (García 2017), this identification works especially at the graphic level. Rubín's art blurs the boundaries between monstrous bodies and human bodies—chainmail becomes scales, teeth become swords, and diverse objects look like parts of dismembered bodies—, underlining an identification that is not as noticeable in the original. The aforementioned crammed style not only conveys a claustrophobic atmosphere, but also an eerie identification between beasts and humans, suggested already in the cover, where Grendel and Beowulf's heads appear superimposed.

For Cohen, "Medieval hybridity is an impudent, relentlessly embodied phenomenon that brings together in a conflictual, 'unnatural' union of races (*genera*) [...]. Medieval hybridity is inherently monstrous" (89). By declaring "*mi carne no es festín de monstruos*" (72), a direct translation of "my flesh is not for feasting on" (Heaney, l.562), García and Rubín's *Beowulf* rejects any association with monsters at a bodily level.

Nonetheless, the body connection is clear: in the eyes of Grendel and his mother, humans are naked, skinless, fleshy creatures. Grendel and his mother are represented in a similar fashion: raw, powerful humanoids made of muscle, blood and bones. Despite their hatred for humans (on account of his envy, in Grendel's case, and on account of revenge, in his mother's), they resemble each other. Death only emphasizes this closeness, since dead flesh makes them uniform and almost undistinguishable. Revealingly, García and Rubín dramatize the finding of Aeschere's head, massacred by Grendel's mother, and the mother holding her son's head (90). This parallelism implies that grieving and pain are not exclusively human feelings, but also experienced by those hybrid creatures, furthering their connection with the humans. This prevalence of fleshy presences and dismembered bodies bring into focus the concept of abjection. For Julia Kristeva, abjection is the human reaction to a breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between self and other or between object and subject (Kristeva, 1-10). A clear example of abjection is the horror or vomit evoked by corpses, which reminds the spectator of his or her own death. The presence of monstrous hybrids also challenges the perception of the self, pointing at a connection that "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced" (Kristeva, 1).

Desire is powerfully intertwined with the notion of abjection and otherness in the comic. When Grendel attacks Heorot at night, he approaches Beowulf in the manner of a succubus; Grendel sexually assaults Beowulf in his sleep, feeling aroused at the sight of his naked body, with a noticeable look of longing in his face. Forni states that this is the only adaptation that has added a sexual dimension to Grendel and Beowulf's encounter (113). What do authors imply by this "unnatural" interrupted union? There are several possibilities; either Grendel is attracted to Beowulf but his only way to interact with him is through violence and rape, or he is attempting to de-other himself through an intimate contact. Furthermore, this scene could function as a visual metaphor

of the body as the ultimate battlefield, whether monstrous or human, or even as a “wry commentary on our own prurient attraction to the violence” (Forni, 113). In either case, Beowulf’s sense of abjection at the sight of an aroused Grendel is evident and he reacts by physically attacking him. They embrace in a fierce battle that ends up with a mortally wounded Grendel.

García maintains that the scene’s sexual tone is part of their contemporary reading; they never tried to reproduce the medieval register, since it would have been impossible to connect with medieval mentality and interpretation of the text. “That the erotic hint of the battle was present or not in the original is irrelevant to our version because we are not trying to understand men and women of yore but trying to understand ourselves” (2017).¹⁰

Apart from the sexual tone of this abject seduction, the prevalence of dismembered bodies, open wounds, severed muscles, blood and other body fluids such as semen and sweat are also manifestations of the abject in the comic. The fact that banners, carpets, wine, food and even water also resemble blood in terms of color and graphic treatment increases this sense of abjection. Rubín’s graphic style, highly influenced by Jack Kirby’s superheroes, emphasizes the abject by embedding smaller panels into larger ones. This technique helps to recreate the characters’ sensory world and allows multiple perspectives (Murel 2018). Those insets are frequently close-ups of gory elements that are difficult to assign. Does that drop of blood belong to man or monster? Is that liquid wine or blood? Is that a brain fragment or part of a monstrous body? At the end, Beowulf’s body and the dragon’s body, the last monster, become almost undistinguishable in their last fight: red against red, flesh against flesh. No doubt, Rubín’s anatomic landscapes function as a mechanism of identification that blurs the boundaries between human and monsters by mingling their abject bodies. As such, it paves the way for a revisionist interpretation of the poem: if bodies are undistinguishable, whose body is being torn? Whose suffering is greater? The identification man/monster reveals how in their adaptation the authors avoid abjection to demarcate the Other but make use of the abject to show how these marginal creatures resemble human beings in their driving forces: hatred, envy, vengeance and survival.

5. Conclusions

García and Rubín succeed in taming *Beowulf*, offering a fresh reading as a result of a productive conflict with the original. The adaptation of this heroic poem for contemporary readers acquainted with superhero comics becomes a cultural translation: from one language into another (West-Saxon, via Heaney’s English with Irish overtones, into Spanish); from Medieval Germanic culture into a postmodern Western culture; from a medium such as Old English poetry into the comic medium. As such, it provides an ambiguous reading of the original at the graphic level, and as a reactivation and revision of the original themes and language, at the script level. While Rubín questions the notions of margins/center and the perception of same/other through his anatomic landscapes, García challenges the medieval notion of heroism and reinterprets Beowulf’s last decision to fight the dragon: guilt is the driving force of the character, not glory or altruism.

While older graphic versions usually draw on the medieval tropes of the warrior and the monster, García and Rubín’s *Beowulf* subverts these stereotypes and the different binary oppositions associated with them—good/evil; civilization/savagery; honor/

vileness; light/darkness—by blurring the boundaries between monsters and heroes. The question implicit in the monomyth—What makes a hero a hero? —is connected to this revisionist project. Not only the journey creates a hero, but also the monsters, since there would be no heroes without them. In a similar way, what makes a monster a monster is a feeling of abjection that pushes these creatures to the margins. In their mutual exclusion, both need each other: for there to be heroes, there must be monsters and vice versa, a circle that is maintained throughout superhero culture. With their *Beowulf*, García and Rubín add a contemporary dimension to the myth of the hero as someone slightly monstrous, while their monsters retain a certain human quality.

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Notes

¹ For more information on *Beowulf*'s comic adaptations, see Gómez Calderón (2007), Tondro (2015) and Forni (2018). See also Bosomworth's website "Beowulf in 2D," devoted to the graphic adaptations of the heroic poem.

² For more information on adaptation as cultural translation, see Porras Sánchez (2018).

³ "Leyendo de adulto *La Iliada* he descubierto que sus conexiones con los temas, conceptos y mecanismos narrativos del Universo Marvel son muy numerosos" (García 2017). Most of García statements come from an interview with the author (García 2017). The interview was carried out in Spanish. I include the Spanish original in the footnotes, and my translation as in-text quotations.

⁴ "Beowulf me impresionaba más porque descubrí en él una cercanía mayor con el perfil del superhéroe moderno" (García 2017).

⁵ Unfortunately, the translation by Stone and Keatingue fails to maintain the original kennings previously translated by Heaney from the West-Saxon that García had later translated into Spanish for the Spanish edition of the graphic novel. Since this translation does not take Heaney's text into consideration as the source text of the graphic novel, I have maintained the references to the Spanish version.

⁶ García is probably referring to *Las Kenningar* (1933) and the prologue to the volume of poetry *Literaturas Germánicas Medievales* (1965).

⁷ "Esas metáforas descomunales tipo 'el camino de la ballena' o 'el agua de la espada', etc., que poseen un sentido poético tan excesivo transmiten algo más que imágenes, transmiten un sentimiento épico y atemporal que proyecta la obra a un ámbito donde se convierte en una representación simbólica y por tanto eterna, por tanto todavía válida para nosotros" (García 2017).

⁸ "Creo que nuestro *Beowulf* en cierta manera 'soluciona' [la llamada a la épica] dando una motivación a Beowulf a través del conflicto de identidad que dejamos enterrado en sus páginas, planteando una variante que no es explícita pero que algún lector avezado podría llegar a descubrir algún día, y que explicaría que Beowulf acude al rescate de los skyldings no tanto porque desee la gloria como porque le impulsa la culpa" (García 2017).

⁹ García has suggested that he might have been influenced by Jorge Luis Borges' "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" (1944) and "The South" (1953) while looking for Beowulf's inner conflict.

- ¹⁰ "Intentamos conectarlo con el público de nuestra época. En eso consiste hacerlo 'vigente' y eso es lo que le da la condición de 'atemporalidad' propia de un clásico. Y ahí es donde surgen aparentes desviaciones como ese matiz erótico de la batalla. Que estuviera o no presente en el original es irrelevante para nuestra versión porque no estamos intentando entender a los hombres y mujeres de entonces, sino que estamos intentando entendernos a nosotros" (García 2017).

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Kratos, Mythical Father

PABLO MEDINA

Abstract

The acclaimed video game saga *God of War* surprises us with a new 2018 installment that shows the evolution of its protagonist, Kratos. In the last three games, Kratos had been a thoughtless hero fully committed to revenge but now the character created by the video game developer, Santa Monica Studio, presents a complex arc of transformation characterized by the protagonist's fatherhood.

The public of the world of video games has changed, has become more mature and demands more complex and narrative contents. We have witnessed this change in the cinema before. The moviegoers went through a maturation process very similar to the one facing video games now. An excellent example of this evolution is the *Star Wars* 1977 saga where George Lucas decided to place its most important moment right at its center: the mythical sentence, "Luke, I am your father."

By doing so, the whole saga's perspective was completely changed. The story that *Star Wars* displays is not just a flourish of incredible effects and spectacular explosions. What it really presents, adorned by all these elements, is a story of forgiveness between a father and a son. The video games mature fast. And in *God of War* we may observe an approach very similar to the one we saw in *Star Wars*.

Kratos has fled from Greece to end up in northern lands. There he raises a family, trying to leave his bloody past behind, and finally embracing a time of peace. But the burden he carries is very heavy, and only the death of his wife will really make him face the relationship with his son. Throughout this last installment we will see how the great hero of one of the most famous sagas of the world of video games embraces fatherhood, how he matures and becomes more human.

Keywords: Video games; *God of War*; storytelling; mythology; cinema.

We all get older: the players, Kratos, fictional character of the saga *God of War*, the narrative of video games. Back in the 1990s, the only concern of the person who sat before a video game was to have fun. It might have happened that from time to time he or she learned something or even got excited about a complex story. But we all get older, even the little sister of the arts.

We are a lucky generation. We have witnessed the birth of an art. This has happened only about seven times in the history of mankind. Video games, a little sister of the cinema and daughter of painting, had tough beginnings. Not everyone has accepted yet nowadays that video games may be a new means of artistic expression, arguing that there are many poorly made video games. In response, we could bring out countless

examples of terrible movies and many other awful theatre plays that, apparently, have not shaken the status of cinema or theatre as art. However, I think we can proceed in a more positive way.

The public of video games has witnessed the evolution of this medium and has seen how the content of the games that occupied the shelves of the stores was increasingly gaining in quality and narrative complexity. In the past a video game could sell a huge amount of copies thanks only to its spectacular technical capacity. As with the rest of the visual arts (painting, photography, cinema, etc.), emulating reality is enough at the beginning. In the first stages of the history of these arts, the quality of a visual work rested in its ability to reflect reality more or less accurately. But we all get older and there comes a time when this is not enough, and more complex expressive means are then needed.

Video games matured throughout the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s. As years went by, the original graphic and sound flourishes were not enough. Complex contents became less unusual and, at the same time, more often requested by a growing public that needed “not more but better.”

God of War was first released on March 22, 2005. The approach was clear: lots of action. The intention of the producer in charge of the project, Santa Monica Studio, was to stir up the players' adrenaline having them face the creatures of Greek mythology. It could have been any mythology. The key was the huge doses of action. What the public really cared for at that time was just that: an action game that had action. It was the single essential requirement for it to succeed. However, little by little, things changed (as in Studstill's 2005 rendition of *God of War*).

In a genre as given to simple solutions as action, things began to change on March 16, 2010 with the release of *God of War 3*. This title was the latest of a tremendously successful saga aiming at reaching the same or even higher level of success than its predecessors. It had it all. All that was required then in order for an action game to succeed: spectacular fighting, violence, greater player's skills to progress to next stages in the game. It had it all. But we all get older. The sales of the third installment of this saga did not please Sony, the company that produced the game. It seemed inexplicable but it happened. The initial explanation of this fact was that the saga was already obsolete. Nobody was interested in the adventures of Kratos, its protagonist. It was surprising since the design of the game mechanics was the most accomplished of the entire saga. But why did Kratos not awaken the interest of players any longer? In order to explain this, we need to get to know more about the most famous Spartan in the world of video games (such as developed by Asmussen in 2010).

Kratos was a Spartan soldier. His life was focused on being an exemplary warrior and he became a powerful fighter. When right in the middle of one battle he was about to die at the hands of an enemy, the god Ares offered him a pact: he would prevent his death and give him great powers in exchange for carrying out tasks for him for the rest of his life. Kratos accepted.

He faithfully executed the bloody missions demanded by Ares for years. However, the cruel god forced Kratos to kill his family and such an act dyed his skin white, like the ashes of his wife and son, and red for their blood. The Spartan broke the pact he had with Ares. He regained control of himself and swore to kill him, doing away with the entire Olympic pantheon in addition to numerous mythical creatures. This was more than enough in 2005.

But revenge did not end Kratos' pain and he continued his series of murders in three installments of the saga. In *God of War 3* he finishes Zeus off and the Spartan dies. Or so we thought, for we all get older, even the powerful Kratos. Sony knew perfectly well that they could not continue the saga with the same old format. Plenty of action and spectacular combat scenes were no longer enough. The public demanded something more complex, for we all get older (Martínez 2018).

The older sister of video games, cinema, had to face this same situation long time ago. In order to understand the evolution of the little sister of the arts we must analyze what happened to the cinema.

A narrative arc cannot reach and move the public if it is not filled with truth. The public will not build empathic bridges with the characters if what happens to them is a lie. It is not about fiction. Nothing to do with portraying facts that have occurred in reality. It is about ideas shared by all mankind, that have echoed in the souls of all people regardless of their origin, time, sex or circumstance. The only way to reach these universal ideas is through empathy.

The world of fiction is more than filled up with epic stories. In the 1960s there was a huge number of films about adventures in outer space. The space race between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. made this theme fashionable. George Lucas wrote a script about space for his movie *Star Wars* and managed to find a relatively limited budget to film it. This 1977 work could have become diluted in the huge mess of fictional contents about space if *Star Wars* had been just another space adventure. But it was not like that. *Star Wars* told a story that could reverberate in anyone's soul, since it spoke of an idea shared by all mankind.

"I am your father." This sentence appeared at the middle point of the saga. The middle point is the key moment in a story, the moment when the story reaches its peak, when everything makes sense and its authentic message is understood. The middle point of *Star Wars* is not a terrible fight or an epic battle between two powerful star fleets that does not reverberate in anyone's heart. This is spectacular and may be beautiful but will not make its way into anyone's soul. However, the broken relationship between a father and a son and the path that Luke Skywalker begins to follow to redeem his father, to bring light to his tortured soul, to recover his love, that certainly has the power to thrill anyone, regardless of their place or time of birth.

Star Wars was a box-office hit thanks to its script. Not for its effects (more sophisticated in many other contemporary films) or for its spectacular scenes, but for the powerful echo of the message it conveyed. The scriptwriter, George Lucas, did not wish to move the viewer with an empty show. He had tried that before and failed. Lucas faced the writing of the script of the movie with a very clear attitude: how can I reach everyone's heart? The only way to go for him then was to embrace a subject matter treated by the Humanities from innumerable points of view and at all times: forgiveness that leads to redemption.

Ethical issues raised throughout the history of mankind offer us numerous answers to this question: should a son forgive his father even though the atrocities he has committed are completely abominable? Will Luke find peace if he embraces resentment and condemns his father? Can Darth Vader redeem himself through love for his son? These questions were contemplated by Lucas during the process of writing *Star Wars*. It falls beyond the scope of this paper to present his opinions about them, but the history of cinema teaches us that it worked: Lucas was right to take a chance on an idea that empathized with all humankind in his attempt to create something immortal.

Even so, we could argue that success with the audience is not enough to account only for film evolution. However, we need to move beyond this fairly superficial approach.

Chesterton said: "Fairy tales are more than true, not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us we can beat the dragons." When we talk about reaching the heart of the audience, we do not mean just selling tickets. This is the logical consequence of the impact and thrill caused by art. We are discussing here the ability of the Humanities to raise questions that echo in the mind of the viewers. It is this kind of questions that make them consider life from different perspectives and give them tools to stand up again after having been knocked down. And to escape the desert of helplessness. People, inspired by art, face life courageously and also find in it a haven to return to when they have been injured. I cannot imagine a better use for it.

Star Wars talked about forgiveness. Not only were there ships firing lightning and light beams. This saga became immortal thanks to its middle point: "I am your father." A father, tortured by violence, by death, by war, who seeks redemption through his son. Little sisters always want to be like their older sisters at some point. They look at them admiringly and wishing they were older too. Video games accomplished the same goals in the 2018 *God of War 4* as cinema did in *Star Wars*.

The character of Kratos had to be developed. His incredible ability to kill was no longer enough. The gamers would not be as thrilled as before with just a great deal of action. It was not necessary, and it was not enough, just enough. The public had grown older and demanded more complex content. What used to work then seemed empty now. To guarantee the success of Kratos, the character needed to take the same leap that Lucas took in *Star Wars*: find a powerful middle point related to an idea that empathized with all mankind. It was a great challenge, but they made it. Let me explain how.

The beginning of the game makes it clear that Kratos has changed. Not only is he older but his eyes, his attitude, his actions, demonstrate that he carries a powerful emotional burden. The game introduces us into a very intimate funeral rite. Kratos faces the death of his new wife. But his son attends the ceremony this time. The Spartan relives the pain of that loss, but he does not turn his pain into a homicidal crusade now, since someone depends on him.

Kratos' son, Atreus, begins the adventure being completely dependent on his father. The first challenge of the game is not to kill a huge number of monsters but to test the boy, hunting with him. The relationship between father and son begins to develop from scratch. At the beginning we can clearly see that Kratos has not changed. He continues to act as the brutal killing machine we met in the third installment. Unable to express his pain in a healthy way, he contains his emotions and suffers again the death of his beloved in silence. But things have changed. We all get older and Kratos begins to exercise his fatherhood by taking a small step, hunting with his son.

The project manager, David Jaffe, clearly saw that the arc of transformation of Kratos would not be understood if it did not start at the beginning of the video game and if the gamer was not guided along the way by the hand of the protagonist. The gamer must witness the change in the life of the Spartan and participate in it, or else he would never accept that Kratos really was Kratos. The beginning of the game makes it clear that it is not just a continuation of the previous ones, but a disruptive break, a necessary evolution, essential to make Kratos a father. "Atreus, I am your father."

That little step, that sentence, "Boy, let's go hunting," is the first step in the new adventure. The script writers did not decide to put on Spartan's lips a statement: "Boy,

I will teach you to be a true warrior." They did not. Because that would have meant a return to the empty shows that stopped working in the first decade of the 21st century. A return that no longer sells video games. The first step of the new adventure is to interact with Atreus, a relationship that we clearly perceive to be very distant.

From that moment on, we begin to move through the Norse mythology seen through the eyes of a foreigner who shows us an update of the myth that the producers chose to create for us. Kratos is a stranger. He does not understand the Nordic world. He sees it from the Spartan perspective and asks himself questions that take us back to the stories that make up his own mythology. Atreus listened to his mother and, obviously, he had a real mother-son relationship with her. Thanks to this, he tells us what the Norse world is like and what myths make up the reality of the game. It is not an easy adjustment. Kratos has killed the vast majority of the Greek gods, his fame has reached the Nordic pantheon and they will not allow him to live in peace. It is too dangerous.

It is very clear. Kratos could easily survive the wrath of the children of Odin if he fled just by himself, as he already did in Greece. But something holds him back. For the Spartan, the change begins when he faces his relationship with Atreus since, when his wife dies, the gods, with their senses, can enter the forest where the two men live and detect them. Atreus will not survive the journey that awaits them if he does not learn to fend for himself. The transformation arc of Atreus, from a poor helpless child to the worthy companion of his father, is also represented by the design of the game mechanics. As we move forward in the story, Atreus improves his skills and he can help his father with the fighting. The player can handle Atreus through the Spartan's orders to his son, becoming key in the last fights in spite of the fact that he hardly does anything at the beginning.

The work of the Santa Monica Studio team is remarkable as they combine the transformation arc of Kratos with all the elements that make up the game. In an arc of narrative transformation, we move from an initial to a final position, which may be moderate or completely different, but the change must be very gradual and supported by all the elements that are available or else it will not produce empathy with the public, looking artificial and inconsistent. Kratos' transformation arc was quite a challenge. Its initial position was known to the public (brutal ruthless warrior) and the final position was completely different: Kratos embraced his fatherhood redeeming himself from a life full of violence and death, as it had happened to Darth Vader.

The first turning point in the story of the new *God of War* occurs on returning from hunting and it is key to the development of the rest of the game. It is only then that we discover that this is a new game, never seen before. Its creators use this fundamental moment in the script to take full advantage of the possibilities offered by the key competitive element for the players: the defense of Atreus. After Kratos returns home, he receives a visit and tells his son to hide. When he opens the door, a thin and tattooed man asks him questions about his past. The Spartan, curiously, avoids the confrontation and tells the stranger to leave. The stranger is not willing to leave and hits Kratos. The latter barely manages to move his face and tells the man to leave again. After a second blow Kratos responds with a very restrained punch that knocks the tattooed man down. When the stranger gets up, he strikes again and throws the Spartan through the air. At that moment one of the most spectacular scenes ever seen in the history of video games takes place. It leads Atreus' father to kill, or so we believe, the tattooed man who was destroying the surroundings of his house. This episode strongly strengthens the bond between Kratos and his son, making it clear that this is his priority, well above his

own security or the desire for revenge that ruled his past life. Now things have changed, we all get older, but Kratos' new ways remain faithful to his nature. He continues to be the same old Spartan. Only better.

Why does Kratos defend his son? Was their relationship not distant and rather unpaternal? Indeed, and precisely because of this, the Spartan's driving force toward change is so powerful and validates its arc, making it coherent. The duty of Atreus and Kratos is to leave the boy's mother's ashes on a distant mountain. It was her dying wish and the whole game consists of the long journey to the mountain from which they will throw her ashes into the wind. At no time does she request from Kratos to train their son, to protect him or coexist with him during the trip. She never does that, which means that the protection that Kratos exercises over his son is a projection of the love he felt for his wife. It is not duty that changes Kratos. Duty does not change anyone. It is not revenge that transforms the Spartan. Revenge does not improve anyone. It is love that changes Kratos. Love changes us all for the better.

The contact with Norse mythology is constant throughout the game. The Norse myths are the structure that accompanies the arc of Atreus' and Kratos' transformation, like the bass guitar that gives solidity to the song while the rest of the instruments shine above it. When the protagonists meet the characters Freya and Baldur, their mythological dimensions remain unknown, and only when we already know them intimately are their authentic mythical identities revealed to us. Throughout the adventure Atreus will find murals where myths are described in the way we have learned them, teaching his father the truth about the world around them. However, these myths have been modified by the studio that created this game, to adapt them to the peculiar narrative of the saga. We get to learn about the reality of these myths through Mimir, who has lived them firsthand, showing us the difference between the information that the inhabitants of the world have received, the original myth, and the reality that befalls the characters of *God of War*, more realistic and grim, but always respecting the myth (Gaiman 2017).

The arc of transformation that we witness in *God of War* is wonderful not because of the brutal fighting we experience throughout the game. Not even because of the marvelous long sequence shots that the producers manage to maintain throughout the game. It is not just that. Kratos' and Atreus' transformation arc is wonderful because we see how father and son, gradually for fifteen hours, learn to express their love, forged in the crucible of love for Faye, Kratos' wife and Atreus' mother. Throughout the game the two protagonists chat while they walk, climb, fight and live through terrible and wonderful experiences. These conversations are what makes us feel that their relationship flourishes: one character "softening" and the other maturing in a process of "sanchozation" of Quixote and "quixotization" of Sancho.

This narrative arc could not be completed without the tattooed stranger who attacks Kratos at the first turning point of the game. This stranger is none other than Baldur, son of Freya, who, according to Norse mythology, dies unjustly because of a trick performed by Loki. This fact does occur in the game, but it is shown through the prism of the narrative in *God of War* that has reinterpreted Greek's mythology in three installments. Gods are capricious in the game and they despise men. They know very well that Kratos is a terrible threat, so Thor sends his children, Modi and Magni, to kill the Spartan and bring his son to Valhalla. This was not part of the Greek's plans and he does away with both characters with the help of Freya. However, when the tattooed

man tries to kidnap Atreus for the third time, he does so in front of Freya and she reacts unexpectedly, protecting Baldur because he is her son.

By understanding this plot twist, we also understand two contrasting characters that help us circumscribe the relationship between Kratos and Atreus. A foil (contrasting) character is a narrative resource used to show dimensions of another character by contrast. In the movie "American History X" (1998) the protagonist, Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), is a violent neo-Nazi who, after being convicted of murder, changes completely during his time in jail. He becomes determined then to prevent his younger brother, Danny (Edward Furlong), from ending up like him. Throughout the first half of the movie we witness the atrocities that Derek commits. To prevent the audience from believing that they are watching a pro-Nazi film, the director, Tony Kaye, introduces Stacey's character (Fairuza Balk), the sister, who does not stop condemning the acts of her brothers. By doing so, the director (Tony Kaye) makes the audience understand that he really condemns Nazism, casting aside halfway through the film any idea that the story is an abject propaganda of racist and totalitarian attitudes.

Baldur is Freya's son. In order to protect him, his much-loving mother gives him the gift of invulnerability. However, attached to this ability, there is the inability to feel anything. Baldur hates Freya for this, arguing that his life is empty, without sensations and feelings, and that he is doomed to live forever in an indestructible prison. The dysfunctional relationship between Freya and Baldur contrasts with the growing parent-child relationship between the Spartan and his son. Following the encounter with this reality, Atreus asks Kratos the most interesting questions and the Spartan sets a rule of conduct that guides his entire arc of transformation: a father will do anything for his son.

This is Kratos' safety buoy. The little haven of humanity he can cling onto, in the ocean of hate and revenge that his life had become. Kratos has always loved his family and, precisely because of that, he seeks revenge. But the same fire that fueled his revenge now fuels the love for his son and his unstoppable determination to protect him and fulfill the promise he made to his wife.

The last combat between Kratos, Atreus and Baldur is the culmination of the myth related to the death of the latter. A brooch that Kratos has improvised to prevent his son's quiver is made of mistletoe and, when Baldur attacks Atreus hitting him in the chest, his fist is caught in the brooch, which sticks to his hand. When this happens, Baldur recovers his mortality and the ability to feel and, after one of the most epic fightings in the history of video games, Baldur falls defeated, and Freya intervenes again to prevent Kratos from finishing him off. Father and son move away and then Baldur tries to kill his mother, as a revenge for so many years of indolent immortality. While he is strangling her, Kratos intervenes, doing away with him for good and saving Freya. She cries for her son reproaching Kratos for his help and provoking the question that seals the father-son relationship: why has Freya not defended herself? How far must a father's love go? His father's answer is clear: as far as it takes. As far as letting oneself be killed by Baldur, as far as killing Emperor Palpatine in order to save Luke; as far as it takes.

We all get older. Although the saga of *God of War* began as a bloodbath without too much content, it has become now the narrative of a father's relationship with his son. A story that upholds a clear message: there is nothing that love cannot overcome. The ability of this video game to disclose and display the Norse mythology has never been

seen before. The clash between Greek and Norse mythology is aptly recreated in this artistic production that manages to capture the video player's attention from the beginning and that validates the fact that Kratos, the most violent Spartan of the world of video games, is a very loving father.

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Mutilated Images in Contemporary Martial Society: Between Mythology and Memory¹

KATARZYNA JERZAK

Abstract

In the present essay I consider contemporary mutilated images—a photograph of a child from the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, a picture of the assassinated Russian Ambassador in Ankara, a burnt photograph of writer Henryk Grynberg's mother, another of his father's grave, Moshe Ninio's photograph "Glass," and the images of the assassination of Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz. All of these images originate in a society I define as martial, i.e. society whose members are exposed to psychic and moral injuries comparable to those sustained in battle. In the martial society the presence of war is seemingly invisible but real, as we live in what Kurt Tsadek Lewin defined in 1917 as *Kriegslandschaft*, i.e. a landscape of war. Lewin writes that in positional as well as in mobile warfare, the line of combat is present, however invisible. His typology pertains to the kind of warfare ostensibly no longer present in the era of cyberwarfare and hybrid warfare in which the line of combat is not only invisible but crosses the landscape of peace as well as the landscape of war, making war and peace the two sides of the same coin. A similar scenario is at work in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. The invisible line of combat can cross the banknote, the letter, even the air. Yet, while in the past everyone was confronted with death and mutilation directly, now it mostly happens on the touch screen. Today, the primal mythical images are still within reach and nonetheless connect our modern selves to the past heroes.

Keywords: mutilated images, martial society, Kurt Tsadek Lewin, Henryk Grynberg, mythology.

1. *Noli me tangere*

One of the oldest prohibitions of Western culture, inscribed in the Decalogue, is that of making images (Exodus 20:4).² Forbidding all representation protects the divine from sacrilege: hence the original Temple in Jerusalem, ostensibly devoid of any iconography and sparingly furnished, whose secular echo are the early modernist buildings of Tel Aviv, without symbols and brutally clear in form.³ Religious aniconism,⁴ still upheld in strict Jewish and Muslim enclaves, is then at the opposite end of the spectrum from the contemporary culture of the image in which imperative cigarette box warnings come in the form of photographs of deformed body organs.⁵ In modernity, it is Catholic iconography—the representation of the body of Christ nailed to the cross, as well as other images of mutilation such as relics and reliquaries—that is responsible for placing the image of a mutilated body in the center of attention. In the Polish religious tradition, the most famous and most venerated image is mutilated as well: the Black Madonna of

Czestochowa whose right cheek had been, according to legend, slashed by a soldier in late Middle Ages. Neither the bleeding Christ, nor the bleeding Mother of Christ are a source of anxiety, at least to the believers: on the contrary, those images are venerated precisely because of their representation of elevated suffering.

2. *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*

If secular mutilated images trouble us, it is because we have been living in what Guy Debord already in 1967 called the society of the spectacle, in which relations between people are mediated by images.⁶ The images we behold daily, in the streets, shopping malls, and online, are idealized, photoshopped pictures of perfection.⁷ Between 1863, when Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* were published, and the trenches of World War I, enough time elapsed so that the public could, to some extent, lose sight of the horrors of war-induced mutilations. Thus, in the summer of 1908, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, faced with an ancient damaged sculpture in the Louvre, could still write the "Archaïcher Torso Apollos," eulogizing the power of a work of art missing its limbs and its head and yet demanding: you must change your life. In the aftermath of several more wars, having also been exposed to decapitations aired on television, we—the late modern viewers and beholders—are less convinced that the representation of a maimed human body could be an inspiration, unless it be in the context of Paralympic Games. At a 2014 academic conference in Warsaw, images of soldiers and civilians mutilated in the Vietnam War were projected on a loop while the speaker discussed the war itself.⁸ After the first few seconds the people in the audience—academics and students—uniformly looked down. Five years later all that remains in the mind of one of the conference participants are not the speaker's words, nor the images we could not bear to watch but the sense of unease they created. And yet, as Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn demonstrates in his video work entitled "Touching Reality" (2012),⁹ we are now in closer touch with mutilated and dead bodies than we might think: while in the past everyone was confronted with death and mutilation directly, now it mostly happens on the touch screen. Hirschhorn claims that:

Looking at images of mutilated human bodies is important because it can contribute to an understanding that the incommensurable act is not the looking; what is incommensurable is that destruction has happened in the first place—that a human, a human body, has been destroyed, indeed, that an incommensurable amount of human beings have been destroyed.¹⁰

3. *Vulnerant omnes, ultima necat*

Images can represent mutilation or damage, i.e. they can depict ruins, damaged objects, handicapped people or they can be mutilated physically, by external damage (fire, water, other kinds of destruction).¹¹ "There can be no image that does not emerge from the wounds of time and history that is not ruined," proclaims comparatist and new media critic Eduardo Cadava at the end of "Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins," in which he analyzes the well-known 1940 photographic image of the bombed Holland House Library in London (2001, 35-60). Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990), whose first experiences as theater director and actor came in the midst of World War II, directed and put up *Return of Odysseus* by the Polish playwright and painter Stanislaw Wyspianski (1869-1907) in 1944 in Cracow:

At that time the Nazis were in full retreat and Kantor envisaged Odysseus as a German Soldier coming home by train after the German surrender at Stalingrad (02.02.1943). A war criminal and a traitor, Odysseus was also coming from the world of ancient fiction to the real world. At the dirty and ugly station nobody would notice him, nobody would care who he is and what he did. There was no Ithaca anymore. (Kocur 2011)

In the end the performance took place in a devastated room. Kantor's aim was not to recreate Ithaca but rather to act retroactively, as it were, on the mythical history and allow the 1944 Odysseus to make an imprint on the ancient myth, as if the degraded reality could affect the original chronotope.¹² For Kantor, the line from the Ancient Greek myth to the 1940s Cracow is dramatically short. The figure of a degraded Odysseus is the link between the world of gods and heroes and the lower order of the modern reality. It is as if there were only one chronotope, a single time-space in which the mythical past, the historical past, and the turbulent present coexist and that is why it is easy for Odysseus to cross from the mythical to the quotidian. Similarly, in Zbigniew Herbert's poetry and essays, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Electra, Orestes and other mythical personae penetrate the poet's present. In the prose poem "The Missing Knot," "Agamemnon stands in the vestibule, lights a cigarette and waits for his wife" (trans. John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter).¹³ The tenor of scene of Agamemnon's return, reminiscent of the return of Kantor's version of Odysseus, is brought down to fit contemporary reality—in this case communist Poland. The scene is also reminiscent of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue*, in which contemporary Polish characters *nolens volens* reenact motifs from ancient Greek tragedies. Thus, Greek antiquity persists, in a kind of colportage of time-space. As Katarzyna Stadnik has noticed, Herbert creates a time-space that encompasses "The overall effect," "that of establishing a panchronic reading of the text, in which the reader is mentally projected to the different moments embraced within a given space, as Greek landscape comes to be construed as a memoryscape."¹⁴ The visual staging of such panchronic or, as I prefer to call them, chronotopic, instances is especially striking in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings. The Italian de Chirico was born in Volos, Greece and assumed the Greek mythology as part of his birthright. In his 1968 painting, "Ulysses' Return," Odysseus returns to a room, or, rather, his entire voyage is a voyage around the room, in a boat with an ocean the size of a puddle on the wooden planks of the floor. This is, de Chirico seems to be saying, where mythology is today: within reach, somewhat downsized to our modern needs, domesticated and contained, it nonetheless connects us to the grand time of the heroes.

Kantor believed that the only way to show life is by lack of life, by images of death and thus in his famous *Dead Class* he had actors wear masks and carry grotesque mannikins representing themselves (see Pleśniarowicz 2018). In his 1927 essay "Photography," cultural critic and theorist Siegfried Kracauer argues already that the photograph does not refer to life, but rather to a form that resembles life but is not it, functioning like a fake form, a mannikin: "The ur-image has long since decayed. [...] The smiles of plastic manikins in beauty parlors are just as rigid and perpetual" (421-436). The photographic image as such, not necessarily damaged or deformed, only a bit darkened, is already an image of death, argues Kracauer, because it represents a *rigor mortis* of sorts—the permanently frozen smile of the figure in the photograph corresponds not to the actual smile of the long-gone grandmother (whose physical body has decayed much like the carcass eulogized by Charles Baudelaire in his eponymous poem) but rather to the generic plastic image of the mannikin: what Bruno Schulz calls a second-rate life, a

cheap knock-off, an intentionally handicapped mannikin (“Traktach o manekinach”).¹⁵ Kracauer then likens the persona on the photograph of the grandmother to a museum display dummy: “There the manikins are displayed solely for the historical costumes, and the grandmother in the photograph is also an archeological manikin that serves to illustrate the costumes of the period” (“Traktach o manekinach” 424). The photograph is no longer a photograph of the grandmother—“it is time that makes images of itself” (424). Thus, in so far as the photograph is always necessarily an image of time, one can venture to say that it is in the nature of the image to be a memento of a temporal wound. Simultaneously, in what cultural historian Giuliana Bruno (2014) calls the era of surface—we are surrounded by screens which are our daily membranes of expression, communication and projection—through the luminous screen, the image gains in materiality, becomes a physical entity that manifests itself on the surface through light. The image on the screen can be touched. While one should not touch a wound, one might touch the dressing.

4. *Jeno odmien czas kaleki*

In the present essay I consider contemporary mutilated images—a photograph of a child from the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, a picture of the dead Russian Ambassador in Ankara, a burnt photograph of writer Henryk Grynberg’s mother, another of his father’s grave, Moshe Ninio’s *Glass*, and the images of the assassination of Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz. All of these images originate in a society I define as martial, i.e. society whose members are exposed to psychic and moral injuries comparable to those sustained in battle.¹⁶ Modern Western society functions in a surreptitious landscape of war, in which the presence of mutilated images is both a symptom and a further cause of anxiety. As Cadava reminds us, “War not only names the central experience of modernity; it also plays an essential role in our understanding of technological reproduction in general and of photography in particular” (47). Our position is as follows: on the one hand most of the time in the contemporary Western world we no longer experience war directly—Antonio Scurati calls this the “myth of the war experience” (2007, 13) and thus speaks of the contemporary literature of inexperience—*letteratura dell’inesperienza* (2006)—but are exposed to it indirectly. War is present on the screen of our televisions, computers, and telephones, unasked for, mediatized, and we are necessarily passive in relation to it. On the other hand, the mere experience of travel can become what Jewish-German-American topological psychologist Kurt Lewin calls *ein Gefechtsgebilde* [battle formation] and a bottle of water found by the security guard at an international airport then becomes a thing-of-war (see Lewin’s essay “Kriegslandschaft”). In other words, by virtue of being at an airport, one can enter a war zone. Not only airports but shopping malls, museums, and even schools can become places of battle. This signals a mixing of spaces which used to be considered separate—and still are in some parts of the world. And yet, it is precisely in Europe that the aftermath of several wars—World War I, World War II, and the Yugoslav Wars—is still palpable enough so that a documentary-essay film by Radu Jude, *The Dead Nation* (Romania, 2017) can still rip a taboo subject over seventy years later simply by showing a trove of—often damaged—images from the years 1936 to 1944, juxtaposed with a text of a memoir and period radio broadcasts. The unspeakable becomes visible in *The Dead Nation* as the decaying images of a prewar and war *insouciance* are layered with music

and commentary. The message seeps through the breaks in the images: no longer intact, they are porous enough so that a different vision becomes possible. Moreover, the director makes us watch them long, while in our epoch “Nobody watches the same image for thirty seconds,” Carolina Crespi (2019) notes.¹⁷ The prolonged exposure to the viewer’s gaze, the fact that the images are still, and last but not least their damaged appearance all contribute to the film’s uncanny effect: all those characteristics are the exact opposite of most contemporary films, including documentaries, that are now focused on technical precision. The kitschy black-and-white perfection of Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida* or *Cold War* cannot achieve the effect of *The Dead Nation* and smacks of facile packaging.

5. *Schimmelgrün ist das Haus des Vergessens*

Unlike the United States, which has been waging various wars on foreign soil, away from the American continent, post-World War II Europe witnessed a series of wars in its midst: the 1991-2001 Yugoslav Wars. As in many recent ethnic conflicts, the wars, despite being front-page news, were not easy to follow for the lay public but have since been subject of numerous literary, cinematic and even video game representations. In the summer of 2018, in an international seminar for educators at Yad Vashem, I met Dr. Bojan Arbutina, Research Associate at the Museum of the Victims of Genocide in Belgrade. He comes from a Serbian family that for centuries was settled as a minority in what is now Croatia. In 2003 he returned with his parents to visit his father’s home in the Kordun region of Croatia. At the time he was eight years old and it was his first visit there. In a photograph he posted on Facebook (January 1, 2019), he—as a child—is touching the damaged image—a photo wallpaper—of a horse on a wall of his father’s room, long abandoned when the family was exiled. There is some burned debris on the floor, several pipes run on the wall and the ceiling, otherwise the beholder sees only the horse’s head, in natural size, and the boy, clad in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, touching the torn photographic print with an extended arm. The photo wallpaper, a symbol of status in late 20th-century communist Europe, plays a double role in this image. Its realism contributes to a double-take: the viewer has to ascertain that this is not a horse, as it were (Fig. 1). It is, however, the white horse that looks at the beholder, while the boy is looking at the strip of the wallpaper. The illusion of a bucolic scene is utterly ruined by the flap of the photo hanging down from the top left corner and by the areas where the wallpaper had been torn off, leaving only remnants. The photographed horse, missing part of its muzzle and nostril, is not an image of horror. Rather, white as the wall around it, the horse seems to be an apparition, a phantom of better times. The unwitting mixture of inside and outside—the horse inside looks as if it were outdoors—makes the image uncanny, as does the fact that in the dingy room, the boy encounters an animal. The boy is whole but shy and his gesture tentative; the horse is torn to shreds and yet his gaze self-assured. The awe visible in the boy’s entire mien is caught—or perhaps held—by the mother’s gaze, as it is the mother who took the photograph. The mother’s eyes are not in the picture, but any subsequent beholder perceives the scene as she did at that moment. She knows more than the boy does and her gaze embraces him in his attempt to touch both the past—unimaginable to him—and the disintegrating present. The father whose room it used to be is not in the picture except as a trace. The war is present and tangible, even though the boy is not touching the carcass of a horse as he might well have done in any given war from antiquity to the present.



Fig. 1. Bojan Arbutina's first visit to his father's burnt home in the Kordun region of Croatia after the Yugoslav war, 2003.

Photo credit: Dinka Arbutina.¹⁸

The scene is primordial, archetypal: nostos, homecoming. Not an image of war per se, it echoes Odysseus' return. Odysseus is recognized by his old dog. The boy cannot be recognized by his father's wallpaper horse, neither is it a real return since the boy had never been there before but he has come to learn about the family's past, about illusion and reality. He approaches the wallpaper horse, or what is left of it, as gingerly as Martin Buber—the real horse he used to pet as a child. In *Meetings. Autobiographical Fragments*, Buber writes about the wounding mismeeting—*Vergegnung*—with his own mother, who had abandoned him when he was three, and then about the encounters with a horse, "When I stroked the mighty mane [...] and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, [...] really the Other itself" (Buber 2002, 32). But then one time the boy becomes conscious of the joy it gives him to stroke the horse and everything changes: it is as if the innocence were lost because he feels himself judged. The maimed image of young Bojan also depicts a loss of innocence. The home is not a home, the horse is flat and mutilated, the joy precluded. He has touched war.

6. *Frierend schutten wir ihnen Graber*

Serving as a field artillery soldier in the trenches of World War I, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) develops his theory of "war landscape," published during a furlough in 1917 as *Kriegslandschaft* (2006 [1917], 129-139; same for the following citations). Lewin distinguishes between *Friedenslandschaft*—the landscape of peace—extending indefinitely in all directions, a "rounded" landscape without a front and a back—and the war landscape, which is delimited and directional: "[Kriegslandschaft] ist begrenzt." Thus, the landscape of peace is as if infinite while the landscape of war is not only finite but seems to have an "end" followed by a "nothing": "Die Gegend scheint da 'vorne' ein Ende zu haben, dem ein 'Nichts' folgt." Counterintuitively, despite its infiniteness, it is

the peace landscape that is reassuring, while the delimited war landscape, because it is followed by the unknown, provokes anxiety.

Lewin writes that in positional as well as in mobile warfare, the line of combat is present, however invisible. His typology pertains to the kind of warfare ostensibly no longer present in the era of cyberwarfare and hybrid warfare in which the line of combat is not only invisible but crosses the landscape of peace as well as the landscape of war, making war and peace the two sides of the same coin (Stowell 2018). Nonetheless Lewin makes several remarks that are applicable to modern war: using the landscape of peace, he describes an incident in Galicia (in what in 1918 becomes Poland), in which a village is attacked outside of the confines of the line of combat. As an artillery soldier, Lewin is nearby and perceives the attack to be unreal because it takes place in “peace landscape.” Therefore, despite the fact that he and his fellow soldiers note the grave danger, they do not act on it. On the contrary, when Thomas “Toivi” Blatt describes his mother being taken away to die in the Sobibor death camp in the middle of World War II, he notes—post-factum—that he had no emotional reaction to that event: “Slowly and sadly she turned to look at me [...]. To this day the scene comes back to haunt me [...]. I would give anything to be able to recreate that moment, to change it, to hug her and tell her I love her but by 1943 it was as if we were robots, moving like expressionless shadows” (Blatt 2008, 30). It is as if he had known that the event belonged to the landscape of war, hence he ought not to react to it in the manner proper to the landscape of peace. Seemingly a passive recipient of violence, Blatt became an active participant who subsequently was able to escape from the camp and survived the entire war.

In another case, Lewin describes the changed aspects of the “war landscape” that contains *Gefechtsdinge* [things-of-battle] while in the peace landscape the same things are the things-of-peace, *Friedensdinge*. A barn, a house, a forest—they all change their character depending on which landscape they are in. Most interestingly for the question of mutilated images that I raise in this paper, Lewin also distinguishes the in-between landscapes: for instance, a landscape which is no longer the theater of combat but where corpses of soldiers and horses still remain, is not part of *Gefechtsgebilde* [battle formation] any more but neither is it a *Friedenslandschaft*. When destruction takes place in *Gefechtsgebilde*, it would be meaningless to treat it as a destruction of a thing-of-peace. This is an extraordinary insight: it means that different laws—even emotional laws—govern the war landscape. Lewin does talk about civilians as well: those civilians who have ended up in the war landscape do not become *Dingen der Gefechtswelt* [things-of-the-battleworld] unless they are spies. Their very presence changes the nature of the landscape of war. Inversely, we might add in 2019, when one visits a Jewish school in Paris or a synagogue in Turin, one is faced with a disturbance of peace (*Friedensstörung*), such as the presence of dozens of well-armed French military at the École Normale Israélite Orientale in the 12th arrondissement or a military armored vehicle at the Piazzetta Primo Levi. Needless to say, the mere presence of soldiers is not a sign of war, but is simultaneously its trace and its potentiality. Lewin’s text ends with the mention of “villages reduced to ashes,” which he calls “Kriegsinseln im Friedensland” (isles of war in the land of peace).

As the Polish literary and cultural critic Adam Lipszyc argues in his essay “The Space of Exception,”¹⁹ the discussion of peace, the paradigmatic nature of the military violence and its lawmaking character form the core of Walter Benjamin’s 1921 “Critique of Violence” (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*):

Benjamin makes the point that the original model of any lawmaking violence is the frontier- or border-establishing violence. It is **making a difference in space**²⁰ that paradigmatically distinguishes violence used by humans as means to an end from a simple predatory act. Benjamin writes: "In this sphere [i.e. the sphere of the constitutional law] the establishing of frontiers, the task of 'peace' after all the wars of mythic age, is the primal phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) of all lawmaking violence."

If peace can be established by means of war, and if things-of-war are now an element of the landscape of peace, we function in the martial society in which the violence of mutilated images is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. In such a society of the spectacle, a photograph of the assassination of the Russian Ambassador in an art gallery Ankara (December 2016) wins top prize at World Press Photo contest. The photographer himself, Burhan Ozbilici, said of the moment: "I was afraid, but I did not panic."²¹ Not a mutilated image per se, the infamous photograph, in its lucid perfection and acute focus, cuts like a knife: in the picture the fallen man does not even visibly bleed, he is extended on the floor straight and with extended arms. Interviewed, the photographer recounts that in the immediate aftermath of the murder, the Turkish assassin went about smashing pictures on the wall. The pictures were photographs of Russia. Therefore, it was not enough to fell Karlov, the images of the country he represented had to be destroyed as well: the murderer was making a difference in symbolic space. In a synecdochal gesture, the assassin drew a line through both the man and the images; in an iconoclastic gesture, he broke the images of the power he was against, but ultimately it was images that won the war: the photographer did not leave the battle scene, taking many more images of the event. What does it mean to be able to touch the picture of such violence? When Archduke Ferdinand was shot in Sarajevo, only a few people could see him. When JFK was shot in Dallas, there were many more witnesses, but the footage was imperfect. The contemporary Polish painter and photographer Janusz Zigmanski renders the assassination in an even more purposefully imperfect, blurred manner in his *JFK* series, as if insisting on the need to distort the feeble photographic image even further, in a blow-up of color and blinding light (Fig. 2). Instead of focusing on the mortally wounded President, Zigmanski places the witnesses—the bystanders—in the center and gives them the vague outlines of Greek tragedy figures, while the eponymous JFK is not even in the picture. Now, everybody willing to watch, can watch Karlov's (the Russian ambassador's) last moments and his demise again and again. His wife and children included.



Fig. 2: Janusz Zigmanski *JFK*. 2015. Oil on canvas, 60x80 cm. Private collection. Photo credit: Janusz Zigmanski.

7. *Вечная жизнь суждена только матери*

In Henryk Grynberg's 1969 short autobiographical novel *The Victory*, the child-narrator recounts how he and his fellow child survivor of the Holocaust Izak Fryd rummage through attics and cellars of houses in Lodz immediately after the war, finding various objects: gas masks, bayonets, letters, snapshots, stamp albums: "After taking a good look, we'd tear the papers into shreds and poke the eyes out of the photographs" (1993, 105). They smash porcelain figurines and tear up pictures of animals, keeping only the gas masks, army belts and bayonets. A lifetime later, in what will become *Memoir 2*, under the date of June 25th, 2012, in McLean, VA where he lives by himself, Grynberg describes "the last photographs with [his uncle] Aron" (2014, 255; translation mine) taken in Israel, blurry. In the same envelope he finds one of the last photographs of his mother, which he believes he had already destroyed by fire as "she looked as if dead on them" (256). He decides to burn the last image as well, so he sets fire to all four corners and watches the photograph smolder slowly while the eyes keep watching him. "I smelled a stench as if something more than just photographic paper were burning and, to my surprise, found that everything was burnt except for the eyes" (256). He then takes his mother's eyes and puts them in his wallet: "so now they come with me everywhere" (256). "The last image of a person is that person's actual 'history'," asserts Kracauer in "Photography," and by last image he does not mean the last photographic image, but the memory-image (1993, 426). "This history is like a *monogram* that condenses the name into a single graphic figure that is meaningful as an ornament," he continues. Grynberg's mother, whom the reader knows as the heroic figure of both *The Jewish War* and *The Victory*, as well as the one who had given him his "mother tongue," the Polish language, and to whose death the novel *Kadisz* is dedicated, does not altogether die. If it is true, as Kracauer states, that "In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow," then by burning the photograph Grynberg, as it were, melts the snow and makes visible his mother's monogram: her eyes. "A shudder runs through the beholder/viewer of old photographs. For they do not make visible the knowledge of the original but rather the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the person who appears in his or her photograph, but the sum of what can be deducted from him or her" (Kracauer 1993, 431). If not for the fact that Grynberg is a writer and thus can transcribe his mother's monogram, the image would have won. In the ostensible landscape of peace, i.e. Grynberg's bucolic Franklin Park in Virginia, both the incineration and the eyes of the dead pursue him.

8. *Die Munder voll Gras*

And yet, Henryk Grynberg himself wishes to have his remains cremated and dispersed in the Potomac River (2011). While writing this article, rather out of the blue, I received a photograph of Grynberg's father's grave at the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw (Fig. 3) where, as his readers know from the essay "Obowiazek" [Duty], a place is reserved also for the author. The sender was one of my doctoral students, who, moved by Grynberg's account of his father's heroism during the Holocaust and his death at the hands of his Polish neighbors, decided to pay homage to him by visiting his grave.

The photograph she sent was a bit dark but nonetheless showed clearly the memorial candle she had lit on the tomb. Touched by her thoughtfulness, I forwarded the photograph to Grynberg himself, convinced that it would please him that a stranger,

prompted by his writings, went to pay her respects to his father's resting place, especially since he is far away and unable to do it himself. His reaction took me aback: "These takes are very strange because they do not show the inscriptions (Polish and Hebrew). I RECEIVE PICTURES OF THIS GRAVE FROM MS. X AND EVERYTHING HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN ORDER (the oil lamp is surely from her). [...] The grave is OK, the photographer is not" (email Feb. 11, 2019, translation mine; all capitals Grynberg's). The anxiety over the effacement of the grave's meaning—the tomb is meaningless as a memorial and a marker unless it is marked with the name—is more than natural. Emily Dickinson's memorable poem 449 speaks precisely to that anxiety: "Until the Moss has reached our lips—/ and covered up—our names—" reads the final, abject line. There is no memory after death without the name, unless it be the Unknown Soldier, remembered as an abstraction. This is even more significant when the name is of one who died murdered and was meant to have neither a marker, nor a grave.²² To understand the driving edge of Henryk Grynberg's anxiety we must bring up another image: the penultimate frame of Pawel Lozinski's masterpiece documentary film entitled *Birthplace* (1992). Having returned to Poland with a film crew to look for his father's remains, Grynberg is at the bottom of a pit dug by helpful villagers, who, after nearly fifty years, come to assist him. In his hand is his fathers' skull.



Fig. 3: Abraham Grynberg's grave at the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw, February 2019.

Photo credit: Anna Baranowska

The readers who know "Duty," know exactly how much pain it took to get Grynberg to accept Lozinski's suggestion to make the film and put himself in that untenable position in which the penultimate frame holds him as he holds the skull. They also know that after the catharsis of bringing his father's remains to a proper burial came the anticlimax: the coffin was not a coffin, but a small box, the shroud was but a rag, the funeral—a

lacking ritual, as it were, as he had never recited the words of the kaddish prayer before. The readers who have read Grynberg's début short story "Ekipa 'Antygona'" [The "Antigone" Crew] know even more: that exhumation and burial of the victims of the Shoah have been one of his earliest concerns. The image of his father's grave itself bears a scar: instead of two dates, there are three: 1907, 1944, 1992; birth year, the year he was murdered, and the year he was exhumed. Asked for permission to be quoted for this article, Grynberg gave it reluctantly, fearing that attention drawn to his father's grave might backfire and cause someone to desecrate it. The artistically torn matzevah with the Polish and the Hebrew on separate sides is not a guarantee of resting in peace. Nothing is, short of being cremated and having one's ashes dispersed into a river that flows thousands of miles away.

9. *Chi ha visto la Gorgone*

In the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann at Beit Ha'am in Jerusalem, one of the prosecution witnesses is Yehiel De-Nur, the writer who called himself Ka-Tzetnik ("Eichmann Trial" 68-69). On the witness stand on June 7th, 1961 he is impeccably dressed in a white suit, but he speaks slowly and at times with difficulty. At the point when he introduces his name, Ka-Tzetnik (Yiddish for Concentration Camper), he bares his left forearm mutilated by the tattooed number 135633. The camera does not show a close-up of the number, only his sudden violent gesture of introduction. The session is televised and aired live in many countries all over the world—except for Israel which at the time does not have television. After a little over eight minutes of testimony, Yehiel De-Nur is asked by the judge whether he could answer some questions, at which point he stands up and falls to the ground. "It's difficult to see exactly what has happened," says the voice we can hear as viewers. The doubly mutilated image of a man stigmatized, marked by his time at Auschwitz, and the man who is literally disabled by his own status. His cup overfloweth.

In the summer of 2018 I was in Tel Aviv, visiting graduate school friends I had not seen in over twenty years. And yet I felt at home in their quintessential Israeli modernist house until, in the space of their home office, I felt an uneasy presence. A large painting on the wall represented an empty space, a glass cage of sorts. It was one of several images there, but only it called out to me. "Whose painting is this?" I asked my hosts. "It's not a painting but a photograph," answered my friend (Meira Kowalsky, Tel-Aviv, June 29, 2018). "Do you know what it is?" I looked again, feeling as if sucked in by the image. "It's Eichmann's booth," I said, almost incredulously, because if not for the fact that I had just been studying the Shoah at Yad Vashem, I would not have been able to recognize the image at all. Moshe Ninio's image is not mutilated, it is not damaged, it is not deformed (Fig. 4; March 2016). On the contrary, it is contained in its icy perfection, thus baring the deformity and mutilation of everything else: history, the Eichmann trial itself, his execution (as Gershom Sholem has written, Eichmann should not have been hanged because for the crimes he had committed death penalty was inadequate, it trivialized the crimes). Eichmann's ashes were scattered at sea, he is nowhere but in this most empty glass booth there is still too much of him. His presence mutilates the world.

Ninio's *Glass*, like a black hole, is hanging in the office of the daughter of a man and a woman who both survived Auschwitz. "Pour moi, les images sont des lieux de passage" (Colard 2001), confirms Moshe Ninio, but where does one go from here? This is it. *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*.

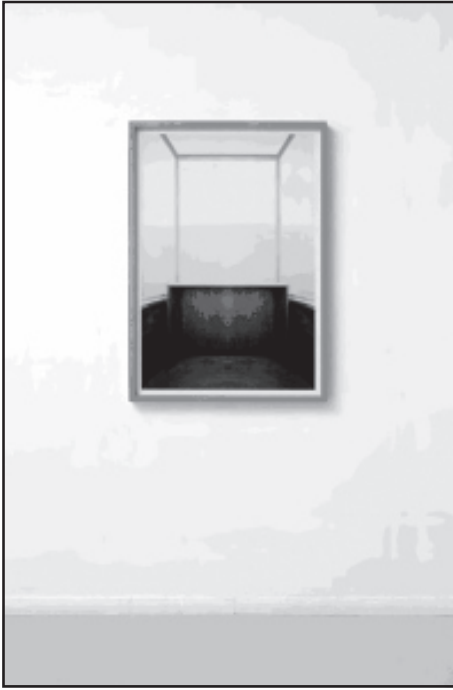


Fig. 4: Moshe Ninio, *Glass (II)*, 2011. Archival pigment print. 107x77 cm.

Photo: Elad Sarig.

10. *Je suis la plaie et le couteau!*

In *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, Georges Didi-Huberman writes that for Warburg, the image was a “total anthropological phenomenon” (Didi-Huberman 2017), a condensation of culture at a given historical moment. This means that at extreme points in the history of civilization, images are imperative. Therefore Ka-Tzetnik had to faint or have a stroke to express himself, his books were not enough. Ninio's Eichmann's booth is like the temple after the death of god and like modernist architecture: sober, devoid of commentary, devoid of ornamentation. It is.

Gdansk, January 13th, 2019: a hellish image, full of people dressed in black, fireworks, noise, confusion, and red smoke—not an obvious, clear-cut picture of mutilation but an image that still cuts. On stage the assassin wielding a knife stabs the Mayor of the city at the climactic moment of a charity event. Everyone in front of the stage is filming it or taking pictures. Thousands of others are watching the live transmission. In the aftermath for several weeks not a single interlocutor omitted the event. Kurt Lewin's line of combat now passes through the middle of a Christmas market, through the middle of the WOŚP concert, through each and every screen we touch. Mayor Adamowicz's ashes may have been sepulchered in the heart of the Old City, but it is in the form of his mutilated image that he will be remembered.

Notes

- ¹ The author of this essay has received written permissions from all parties involved to reproduce all the images contained in the text.
- ² "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). Needless to say, the divine is not at the center of modern preoccupations. Thus, Adorno writes in 1947, in Los Angeles, that the modern cult of the new "enmeshes and assimilates equally objects and the view of them" and that "Itself unattainable, newness installs itself in the place of overthrown divinity amidst the first consciousness of the decay of experience" (1978, 237). His analysis of sensationalism disseminated through technology in the culture of the masses, and especially of the new become pleasure, can apply well to the image of the exploding, collapsing World Trade Center, aired again and again on the news and watched again and again by the mesmerized audiences.
- ³ For a formidable account of the Israeli architectural project, see Zvi Efrat, *The Object of Zionism* (2018).
- ⁴ The claim that Israelites were not as aniconic or iconoclastic as once thought was put forth by Kalman Bland, in his 2000 study, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*.
- ⁵ Pictorial cigarette pack warnings have been proven to be more effective than text-only warnings. (DOI:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2014-051978).
- ⁶ "Le spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images" (Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, 1967).
- ⁷ A proper historical analysis of mutilated images across the ages is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to mention the well-known cases of mutilation of portraits and sculptures in the late Roman Empire: "The material record corroborates the central role that images played in violent political transitions. Intentionally mutilated portraits survive for almost every 'bad' emperor who suffered some form of memory sanctions, beginning with Caligula. Indeed, for certain emperors such as Macrinus or Maximinus Thrax, every surviving portrait has been attacked and mutilated" (Eric R. Varner, 2013, 124).
- ⁸ For a discussion of the mutilation of the dead in ancient Greece and Vietnam, see Tritle, L. A., "Hector's Body: Mutilation of the Dead in Ancient Greece and Vietnam," 1997 (123–136).
- ⁹ <https://vimeo.com/55482318>. Accessed February 20, 2020. Depicting and viewing mutilated bodies and corpses has been the artist's preoccupation in many of his works since 2006.
- ¹⁰ https://ima.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/thomas_hirschhorn_touching_reality.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2020.
- ¹¹ The most notorious recent case of a purposefully damaged image is surely the affair of British street artist Banksy's destruction—or, to be more precise, half-shredding—of his painting (a copy of one of his murals) entitled "Girl with Balloon" on October 5th, 2018, immediately after its being sold for over a million British pounds at a Sotheby's auction. While Banksy's graffiti and murals have a long history of being damaged or destroyed by virtue of their being situated on buildings in the midst of cities or in territories affected by war, this case was different and seemingly aimed at the capitalist enterprise of the art market.
- ¹² <https://www.cricoteka.pl/pl/theatrical-place/>. Accessed February 20, 2020.
- ¹³ *Gods and Mortals: Modern Poems on Classical Myths*, ed. Nina Kossman, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 239.
- ¹⁴ http://dlibra.umcs.lublin.pl/Content/28642/czas17868_35_1_2017_7.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2020.
- ¹⁵ "If they are going to be people, let us give them only one side of the face, one hand, one leg, namely the one that will be necessary for their role." (Bruno Schulz, "Traktach o manekinach albo wtora Ksiega Rodzaju")

- ¹⁶ Antonio Scurati, in *Dal tragico all'osceno* (2016, 45-55), writes about the wave of PTSD experienced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks by the mere TV viewers. Since the images of the burning, collapsing WTC towers were transmitted repeatedly, individuals were subject to repeated trauma, even though they may have been geographically distant from the event.
- ¹⁷ "Nessuno guarda più la stessa immagine per trenta secondi."
- ¹⁸ On his father's side, Dr. Arbutina lost ninety-two family members in the Yugoslav Wars (Facebook post, January 1, 2019, cited with Dr. Arbutina's written permission).
- ¹⁹ The essay exists in manuscript form only and I quote it here with Lipszyc's permission (Adam Lipszyc, email communication to author, January 3, 2017).
- ²⁰ Emphasis is Lipszyc's.
- ²¹ This particular quote comes from Jack Shepard's article in the *Independent*, February 13, 2017, titled "Photograph of Russian ambassador assassination wins top prize at World Press Photo contest."
- ²² For a discussion of the role of names in post-Holocaust literary accounts concerned with memory and identity, see Katarzyna Jerzak's online essay "Phantom Jewishness in Contemporary European Novel."

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Testing the Resilience of the Myth in the Audiovisual Creation

XIANA SOTELO

Myth and the Audiovisual Creation. By José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb (Eds.). Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2019.

Abstract

The book *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation* (2019), edited by José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, is a well-organized, thought provoking and multilingual collection that displays a deep knowledge in the analysis of reception of myths in contemporary audiovisual formats. Its objective: to test the resilience of the myth in the field of films, television series and video games while becoming a platform for reflection on the current standardization of contents and versatility of formats. As the book brightly exposes, new interdisciplinary challenges arise in the face of the digital turn and its profound transformation puts forward new questions that address the extent to how “technological changes are affecting mythical stories” (Losada 2019, 26). The book’s examination is carried out from a cultural myth-criticism approach, observing the attempts in this field to “pseudo-mystify historical figures, romantic ideas or metaphors” that deeply permeate audiovisual cultural manifestations (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 7). The articles in this volume gather well known experts in the field and European and American researchers who, in testing the authenticity in mythical narratives, undertake a rigorous cultural myth-criticism analysis of successful films and popular television series. As their inquiries unfold, they address the impact of transcendence in our lives, still a prevailing element in audiovisual creations.

Keywords: Myth, authenticity, cultural myth criticism, audiovisual creation, films, television series, video games.

1. Introduction

With special emphasis in the field of films, television series and video games, as stated by the editors José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation*¹ is intended to test the resilience of the myth (2019, 7) and to prove its endurance and validity in the face of a paramount storytelling paradigm shift brought forward by technological advances undergone since the end of the 20th century. Driven by a global distribution network, which online formats facilitate, together with the ongoing expanding individual and collective consumption markets, unprecedented audiovisual developments have altered the very fabric of the interactions between the receivers and the new formats. In correlation, in recent decades, global markets are witnessing a greater revolution in terms of “the standardization of content and the versatility of formats” (Losada 2019, 19).

In a move that encompasses a reflective gesture towards the systematic changes brought forward by the digital revolution, this volume, a well-organized, thought provoking and multilingual collection, becomes a platform for reflection on the current situation, as Losada asserts, that makes it “necessary to reflect on the new modulation myths receive” (41). As the book brightly exposes, new interdisciplinary challenges arise in the face of the digital turn and its profound transformation puts forward new questions that address the extent to which “technological changes are affecting mythical stories” (26).

The book’s examination is carried out from a cultural myth-criticism approach, “the study of transformations of the myth in contemporary society” (26), observing the attempts in this field to “pseudo-mystify historical figures, romantic ideas or metaphors” that deeply permeate audiovisual cultural manifestations (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 7). As we will see, the articles in this volume gather together experts in the field and well known European and American researchers providing a cultural myth-criticism analysis of successful films and popular television series aimed at unveiling the continuous dedication to the impact of transcendence in our lives.

Indeed, fascination around myths can be said to have haunted human beings of all ethnical backgrounds since the beginning of times. Impelled by the commitment to find answers to humanity’s origins and destiny, drastic advances in science are providing nowadays a platform to replace mythical narratives. In this scenario, current artificial inflation of “myths” (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 7) necessarily calls for interrogation and revision. With the digital turn, mythical narratives not only have witnessed an explosion of new formats, but they also had to adapt to an audiovisual storytelling process not always thoughtful about its authentic mythical account. When digital interactions allow for transgression and ambiguity and when “linearity become[s] meaningless” (41), the question then arises of how to identify the authenticity in mythical stories.

2. José Manuel Losada, “Myth in the Digital Age”

In his introductory article, written both in English and Spanish, “Myth in the Digital Age”/ “El mito y la era digital,” José Manuel Losada provides guidance in answering this question by articulating a definition in progress that becomes an applicable formula to test the authentic mythical narratives in audiovisual formats. Its identification illustrates the essential narrative elements and requirements of mythical narratives that differentiates it from other types of narrative accounts. As he annotates, authenticity in the myth is unraveled if it comprises the following:

Explanatory, symbolic and dynamic account of one or various personal and extraordinary events with transcendent referent, that lacks in principle of historical testimony; is made up of a series of invariant elements reducible to themes submitted to crisis; that presents a conflictive, emotive and functional character, and always refers to an absolute cosmogony or eschatology, either particular or universal. (20)

As it can be inferred, to pass the “authentic narrative test” the requirements that must be met are: that the story, always with transcendent denotations, tells incredible events regarding the origin of the universe (cosmogony) and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind (eschatology); that the story, lacking historical evidence, is told in a “explanatory, symbolic and dynamic account” and parts of the story correspond to

“themes submitted to crisis.” Finally, the protagonist of the story must be a highly uncanny figure who is a “conflictive, emotive and functional character” (see above, 20). When these premises are met, the story therefore can be claimed to be authentically mythical.

Testing the resilience of the myth, Losada’s definition can be celebrated as an illuminating “testing-formula” in progress able to distinguish authentic mythical accounts from appropriations.

His research covers three areas of study: 1) traditional myths in films, Classical, Germanic and Biblical (21-28); 2) Myth and Science Fiction in TV Series (28-36), and 3) Myth and Fantasy in Video Games (36-42).

In the section of classical myths in films, through the application of his testing principle, Losada discloses how ancient myths are still a vivid source of inspiration within the film industry. As an example, *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis 1981) and the two sequels released in 3D, *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier 2010), and *Wrath of the Titans* (Jonathan Liebesman 2012), “essentially base their plots on the adventures of Perseus and Andromeda [...] boldly paired with the Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Homer’s *Odyssey*,” Losada explains (21).² What is really interesting in his analysis is the examination of a “not self-sustaining” depiction of transcendence, just psychological transcendence (Gods and titans depends on humans’ belief for their survival), which paradoxically mirrors and yields some clues into contemporary relations with the supernatural.

When revising Germanic myths in films, “there is no shortage of examples of Norse myths,” affirms Losada (24).³ Examples range from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson 2001-2003), based on the novel by the same name, by J. R. R. Tolkien (1937-49), to films that portray mythical Scandinavian characters such as in *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh 2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi 2017) manufactured by the “Marvel Cinematic Universe” (25). Undoubtedly, it is precisely the wide diversification in use and meaning that Scandinavian mythology is currently undergoing, without there “being clear boundaries between Wagner and the Marvel Universe’s Thor comics,” what necessarily calls for an examination on their interpretative framework (24).

The same line of reflection applies to the intimate relationship between myth and religion. “Religion is at the root of all myths,” Losada clarifies, “because it is impossible to discuss myth in the scientific sense without personal or cosmic transcendence relative to an absolute cosmogony or eschatology (general or particular)” (26). In this line, the film *Noah* (Darren Aronofsky 2014), which characterizes one of the main myths of all religions, the flood, successfully accomplishes the premises for an authentic mythical audiovisual recreation (27).

Furthermore, in the section Myth and Science Fiction in TV series, Losada proposes an engaging discussion about what it can be called, considering the “usurpation of the extreme” by science fiction unparalleled high-tech effects. An emblematic example is found in the *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang 1927) where an android transcends human limits. Moreover, in a more contemporary format, the ten episodes of the first season of the television series *Westworld* are accurately scrutinized containing three essential myths: “the existence of two heterogeneous worlds [...], the creation of human beings [...] and the labyrinth or maze” (32). Applying again his testing myth-criticism paradigm, it is pointedly in the androids’ process of “awakening of consciousness” (31), at the intersection between artificial intelligence and emotional consciousness, where we can

identify the existence of individual cosmogony in the story. Indeed, it is in “the passage from mechanical existence to human existence” – where the myth can be uncovered (31). In addition, there is consideration to be acknowledged in the interaction between science fiction and myth, when it potentially allows for the troubling acceptance, by the viewers of androids’ world, of moral categories as superior to those of humans.

In the final section, Myth and Fantasy in Video Games, the video games *Kingdom Hearts*, *Dark Souls*, *The Last Guardian* and *One Piece* put myths to the test. These very popular virtual games recreate “imaginary adventures between gods, humans and animals, often originating in or related to mythology” (37). In here, the true challenge in discovering the authentic mythical narrative relies on our ability to differentiate between the blurring boundaries between fantasy and magic. For this reason, it is in this format where the call for an intellectual and academic rigor is even greater. As Losada cautions:

Myths may contain situations of magic and fantasy, but fantasy is not a guarantee of myth: only when there is absolute cosmogony or eschatology, whether personal or universal, and a supernatural transcendence, whether cosmic or personal, there is myth. (39)

Accordingly, when following the essential presumptions of an authentic mythical account found in “cosmogony or eschatology and supernatural transcendence,” it can therefore be unearthed how both “science fiction and video games often contain camouflaged mythical narratives” (25) waiting to be unriddled.

Another important aspect to remark upon is that José Manuel Losada offers myth-criticism’s researchers informed recommendations and knowledgeable guidelines. Firstly, he reminds researchers that their analysis deals exclusively with myths (26) and their examination cannot be reduced to “the progressive convergence of plots” between the mythical narration and the audiovisual recreation; on the contrary, their main duty is “to unravel the myth” (29). Secondly, he emphasizes the need to test the mythical narratives for their transcendence; that is, if there is no transcendent dimension, no authenticity can be claimed in the myth (21). Thirdly, he advises to be on the alert for the beclouded boundaries between fantasy and mythology: only then, distinctions between characters that are mythical and those that are not (37) can be clearly made. And even when the audiovisual creation does not meet any of the requirements of the “testing formula,” to be considered an authentic mythical narrative, as in the case of *Æon Flux* video game, the researcher’s responsibility is to discern “the referential function of the myth in an amythic context” (38). Finally, Losada consciously instructs on the misleading “tendency, common in the academic world, to apply empirical scientism to religion, mythology and literature” (25).

In sum, his introductory article is notably documented and enlightening. Apart from brilliantly crafting the unprecedented changes that audiovisual creation has undergone during 20th and 21st century (from traditional drawing, painting, sculpture, to cinema, science fiction and video games), it successfully conveys a solid cultural myth criticism framework capable of testing authenticity within the dynamic nature and character of the myths that are being recreated in audiovisual formats. Furthermore, his introduction offers a rigorous analysis and application of cultural-myth criticism’s premises that both instruct on the disciplinary tenets of the field and provide an argumentative framework in which to contextualize the rest of the articles of the collection.

In an age and time when the boundaries between creativity and verisimilitude are no longer apparent, his examination interrogates to what extent innovation and adaptability

of virtual interactions can guarantee authenticity in the mythical narratives. In the following section of the book, well-informed, skilled and insightful researchers, from various European and American universities, carry this interrogation further. Their multilingual articles (English, Spanish and French) have been organized around four main categories of analysis: ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary myths.

3. Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary Myths

With the title “Variantes modernes sur le mythe de la métamorphose” (Modern Variants on the Metamorphosis Myth), the first article in the section of “Ancient Myths” is written in French by Pierre Brunel. In his study, the myth of metamorphosis is reviewed through the film *Métamorphoses*, by Christophe Honoré (2014) and it is approached as the vicissitude of the Ovid’s stories in today’s France. In addition, it provides a brief but detailed outline of some metamorphosis in music (Richard Strauss, Michaël Levinas), in painting (Júlio Pomar, Gérard Garouste) and in the lyrical prose (Claudel).

The next article that deals with ancient myths is written in Spanish by Belén Galván, entitled “Orfeo descende a la logia negra: recepción y actualización del mito de Orfeo en *Twin Peaks* (1990-2017)” (Orpheus’ descent to the Black Lodge: reception of Orpheus’ myth in *Twin Peaks*, 1990-2017). In it, Galván brightly proposes an in-depth inquiry in the mythical narrative pattern of the descent to the underworld in the TV show *Twin Peaks* (seasons 1 and 2, the film *Fire Walk with Me*, 1992, and *Twin Peaks: The Return*, 2017). Testing the resilience of Orpheus’ myth, intertextual connections with the myth are strongly recognized in the evolution of the character of Agent Dale Cooper. Arguing for a plausible identification with the Orphic mythical tradition of the hero, agent Cooper is characterized as “an Orpheus-like figure” (93).

In the final article of this section, Metka Zupancic undertakes a dazzling examination on the ability to recognize how mythical schemes are incorporated in the film *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky 2017) into new mythical narrative(s). In the intersection between myth criticism and recent film studies, her article, “Aronofsky’s *Mother!* (2017): The Disturbing Power of Syncretic Mythical Paradigms,” lays out some of the aesthetic, emotional, intellectual and spiritual functions of the mythical paradigms utilized in the film. Moreover, Zupancic interrogates to what extent overlapping mythical schemes can be discerned by the viewers and if so, what possible impact they might have on the audience. In the analysis of the myth of the eternal return, the dominating structural component of the film, the allegory of the “Mother Nature” is unearthed as the recurring healing promise against narcissistic sexism. This, in turn, exposes the conflict ingrained at the center of ethical dilemmas. Equivalently, her paper insightfully advocates for a sense “of responsibility and empathy in view of the sacrifices inflicted upon the Great Mother, and by extension, upon our universe” (112).

Moving on to the next section, in “Struggle, Purification and Renewal: A Study of the Shinto Elements in Miyazaki Hayao’s films *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*,” Saul Andreetti argues that Miyazaki Hayao’s films potentially become a platform for the recreation of Japanese mythical narratives. In the particular examination of the structure of both films, *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001), the mythical pattern of initial struggle, ensuing purification and final renewal is successfully tested. Furthermore, acknowledging *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* traditions, Andreetti’s analysis displays how anime is an acceptable tool to construct a mythical past and make it accessible and appealing to Japanese and international modern audiences.

In the exploration of a different format, Luis Alberto Pérez Amezcua in his article, "Mito y mistagogia hipermoderna en *American Gods*," written in Spanish, interrogates the reasons behind the current success of medieval mythical accounts on the global markets of audiovisual recreation. His observation is focused on the TV show *American Gods* (2017), based on the homonymous novel by Neil Gaiman. His theoretical framework relies on José Manuel Losada's cultural myth-criticism theories, coupled with Lipovetsky and Serroy premises on hypermodernity and cinema.

In the next section, "Modern Myths," two articles approach the figure of Don Juan in current film production. On the one hand, in "La genesis de *Don Giovanni* según Carlos Saura," Alessia Faiano focuses on the intersemiotic, metatheatrical and hyperdiscursive aspects that characterize Carlos Saura's film *Don Giovanni* (2009). In the task of unraveling Don Juan's myth, the historical dimension of the characters and the fictional dimension of the mythical narrative are subjected to myth-criticism's scrutiny. On the other hand, Antoaneta Robova evaluates the adaptability of Don Juanism in a broader film production scope in "Métamorphoses cinématographiques contemporaines de Don Juan" (Contemporary cinema metamorphoses of Don Juan). Thus, through films such as *The Man Who Loved Women* (1983), *Don Juan DeMarco* (1994), *Don Jon* (2013) or *Irrésistible Alfie* (2004), mythical invariants are tested for authenticity. Transformation and modernization of the mythomaniac behavior of Don Juan is further investigated along esthetics trends of contemporary cinema such as in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1997) and *Don Juan DeMarco* or *Don Jon*.

The last section of the book is devoted to "Contemporary Myths." In the first of its articles, Signe Cohen, in "The Oracle in Your Pocket: The Mythology of Siri," sagely considers the growing body of popular myths currently being formed around intelligent personal assistants, such as Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, and Microsoft's Cortana. In her review, Cohen sensibly exposes how these contemporary mythologies, created around these virtual assistants, simulate the religious beliefs surrounding traditional instruments of communication with the divine, such as the ancient Egyptian *shabti*, the Biblical *teraphim*, and the oracular heads ascribed to Orpheus, Pope Sylvester II, and Friar Roger Bacon.

In "La mitificación del nazismo en *El niño con el pijama de rayas*" (The Mythification of Nazism in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*), María Jesús Fernández Gil proposes an examination of the role that Hollywoodian cinema plays in the invention of a mythicized conception of Nazism. In particular, Fernández Gil argues that Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993) can be credited to be responsible for the normalization of the myth of the struggle between good and evil, setting the tone in Hollywood over the following decades. Revolting against binary illustrations of the holocaust and firmly opposing "victims vs victimizers' dichotomy," Fernández Gil notably exposes the changes that this narrative frame has undergone in recent years. And it does so, by contrasting the *Schindler's List* with the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Mark Herman 2008).

Moreover, in "Los viajes en el tiempo y la tradición" (Time Travel and Tradition), Javier Martínez Villarroja analyzes the mythical precedents of one of the most recurring arguments in science fiction: the journey in time. Taking as starting point the works of Joseph Campbell and the method of convergence by Gilbert Durand, Martínez Villarroja markedly demonstrates that some of the myths of the universal mythology are constantly a source for science fiction recreation. As he argues, public's fascination with science fiction conjecture of time travel may derive from the very premises that

demonstrate the validity of its mythical account. According to Martínez Villarroya, these would be: 1) the time of the ordinary world is false; 2) consequently, time is relative; 3) ultimately, time does not exist (what exists is eternity).

In the last of the articles of this section, Carmen Rivero Iglesias provides a perceptive postmodern framework for reflection. In “Realidad y simulacro: la desmitificación de la técnica en *Abre los ojos*” (Reality and Simulacrum: The De-Mythification of Technology in *Open Your Eyes*), Rivero Iglesias draws a parallelism between the demystification of technology in Amenábar’s film *Open Your Eyes* (1997) and critical theories of media societies. In her inquiry, Amenábar’s second film is interpreted in contrast to Baudrillard’s conception of reality as simulacrum; in addition, it provides a platform for reflection on the role of cinema as an intermediate in postmodern cultures.

Indeed, it is in the vehement invitation to reflection, observation and academic rigor that the common thread that unites all the articles of all these sections is found. Furthermore, these articles display an “innovative methodology that draws from the real nature of the contents of fiction,” that is, “they sustain that the represented history has its own true life” (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 8). And they do so by rescuing the authentic mythical narrative from the shaping forces of our contemporary societies and their global markets of production and consumption.

Together, all the contributors demonstrate that myths, either ancient, medieval, modern or contemporary, need to be considered as valid tools capable of helping us understand the conundrum of human nature and the eternal questions regarding our world and our destiny. Brilliantly articulating the transformations of myth in our time, this international and multilingual collection of articles correspondingly develops into a compelling intellectual testimony of how the digital revolution—in particular film, television series and video games—unquestionably and undeniably impacts mythical stories.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, in our digital times, it can be argued that the growing fascination with mythical accounts is coupled exponentially with the proliferation of new audiovisual formats of storytelling. What this volume demonstrates, nevertheless, is that this fascination cannot be separated from humans’ eternal quest for transcendence in their lives; for a supernatural dimension as grounded as revelatory in the eternal questions of humanity’s origins and destiny.

Nowadays, unprecedented technological advances within contemporary audiovisual formats urge us to frame the right questions when seeking authenticity in mythical narrations. To these means, this book both shows us the way and accompanies us in the successful application of cultural myth-criticism testing premises aimed at assessing reliability in the digital recreations of the myth. As it has been shown, all the articles display a deep knowledge about the analysis of reception of myths in contemporary audiovisual formats. Interestingly enough, testing the accurate adaptability of mythical stories, it can be argued that they all point at one legitimate cause for the resilience of the myth in the digital area: the realization that myths “continue to be a particularly suitable tool for the knowledge of our society and of ourselves” (Losada & Lipscomb 2019, 8).

Capturing the spirit of an emerging and exciting field of study, expanding through practice and inquiry, this work is a substantial and important contribution that both instructs and inspires. As an overall conclusion, it should be highlighted that the

carefully selected articles guide new and established researchers to engage in critical reflection in the quest for authentic mythical modulations in the ever-expanding 21st century digital latitudes. Its literary and cultural significance, within the field of humanities at large and cultural myth criticism in particular, makes *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation* an essential read for scholars and students in the field.

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Notes

- ¹ As stated by the editors, José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, *Myth and Audiovisual Creation* continues the reflection started a decade ago in the following volumes: *Myth and Emotions* (edited by José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb), Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 345 pp.
Mitos de hoy. Ensayos de mitocritica cultural (edited by José Manuel Losada), Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016, 211 pp.
Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth (edited by José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb), Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, 441 pp.
Nuevas formas del mito. Una metodología interdisciplinar (edited by José Manuel Losada), Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2015, 221 pp.
Abordajes. Mitos y reflexiones sobre el mar (edited by José Manuel Losada), Madrid: Instituto Espanol de Oceanografia, 2014, 274 pp., 95 illustr.
Mito e interdisciplinariedad. Los mitos antiguos, medievales y modernos en la literatura y las artes contemporaneas (edited by José Manuel Losada & Antonella Lipscomb), Bari (Italy): Levante Editori, 2013, 458 pp., 80 illustr.
Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel (edited by José Manuel Losada & Marta Guirao), Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 523 pp.
Mito y mundo contemporaneo. La recepcion de los mitos antiguos, medievales y modernos en la literatura contemporanea (edited by José Manuel Losada), Bari (Italy): Levante Editori, 2010, 785 pp., 45 illustr. International Research Award "Giovani – Città di Salerno" (Italy).
- ² In addition, there is no doubt, as Losada asserts, "that the adventures of *Westworld* imply, in an original hellish setting, a modern reproduction of the Cretan myth" (29).
- ³ As José Manuel Losada elucidates, Norse mythology originates almost exclusively from medieval Iceland, which was later appropriated as a shared legacy by other Scandinavian peoples and subsequently by Germanic peoples (22).

References

- Losada, José Manuel, ed. (2015). *Nuevas formas del mito. Una metodología interdisciplinar*. Berlin: Logos Verlag.
- Losada, José Manuel and Antonella Lipscomb, eds. (2019). *Myth and the Audiovisual Creation*. Berlin: Logos Verlag.

JOURNALS RECEIVED

British Journal of Aesthetics, Comparative Literature, New Literary History, Poetics Today, Philosophy and Literature, Critical Inquiry, Journal of Modern Literature, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism

The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (ISSN 0252-8169) is a quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal published by Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, India since 1977. (Vishvanatha Kaviraja, most widely known for his masterpiece in aesthetics, *Sahityadarpana* or the “Mirror of Composition”, was a prolific 14th-century Indian poet, scholar, and rhetorician.) The Institute was founded by Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla (1942-2020) on 22 August 1977, coinciding with the birth centenary of renowned philosopher, aesthetician, and art historian, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), to promote interdisciplinary studies and research in comparative literature, cultural theory, aesthetics, philosophy and criticism of the arts, art history, and history of ideas. He edited and published the journal for over 40 years as the founding editor.

The journal is committed to comparative and cross-cultural issues in literary understanding and interpretation, aesthetic theories, and conceptual analysis of art. It also publishes special issues on critical theories of current interest and contemporary relevance. It has published the finest of essays by authors of global renown like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, John Hospers, John Fisher, Murray Krieger, Martin Bucco, Remo Ceserani, J B Vickery, Menachem Brinker, Milton Snoeyenbos, Mary Wiseman, Ronald Roblin, T R Martland, S C Sengupta, K R S Iyengar, V K Chari, Suresh Raval, S K Saxena, Gordon Epperson, Judith Lochhead, Charles Altieri, Martin Jay, Jonathan Culler, Richard Shusterman, Robert Kraut, T J Diffey, T R Quigley, R B Palmer, Keith Keating, and others. Some of these celebrated essays have been published by Routledge in book format.

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Celebrated scholars of the time like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, Mircea Eliade, Monroe Beardsley, John Hospers, John Fisher, M H Abrams, John Boulton, S K Saxena and many Indian and Western scholars had been members of its Editorial Board.

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO A SUSTAINING FUND

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